THE
GOOSE
WOMAN
REX BEACH

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The Goose Woman

The Goose Woman

And Other Stories

By REX BEACH

AUTHOR OF

"The Auction Block," "The Barrier," "Big Brother," "Crimson Gardenia," "Flowing Gold," "Going Some," "Heart of the Sunset," "The Iron Trail," "Laughing Bill Hyde," "The Ne'er-Do-Well," "The Net," "Pardners," "The Rainbow's End," "The Silver Horde," "The Spoilers," "The Winds of Chance," etc.

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THE GOOSE WOMAN

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Contents

	Page
The Goose Woman	1
Cave Stuff	105
Cool Waters	150
The Michigan Kid	178
Powder	223

The Goose Woman

I

FOR two days now an almost continuous stream of traffic had flowed back and forth along the road. The weather was dry, and dust thrown up by passing vehicles had settled upon grass and shrubbery. It penetrated Mrs. Holmes's house and covered its scanty furnishings with a thin, gray coating; it hung in the air and choked her. Dust was nothing new to her—in fact, dust, grime, disorder were nearly always present in her house—but now its taste was irritating and it caused her to revile the sightseers who had turned this back road into a busy thoroughfare.

All were morbid curiosity-seekers; they were bound to or from the scene of the Ethridge murder.

Mary Holmes had heard the news of the crime while she was feeding her geese two mornings before, and had hurried up the road as fast as she could go. She had been one of the first to reach the scene of the tragedy, arriving nearly an hour ahead of the policemen and the newspaper reporters. Inasmuch as she had known Amos Ethridge quite well and was his nearest neighbor, naturally she had come in for a good deal of questioning.

She had little to tell, nevertheless it had been an exciting experience; it had reminded her of old times to answer and to parry quick, searching questions, while reportorial pencils flew to keep pace with her words. The reporters had stared at her curiously and had wanted to know who she was—all about her, in fact—but she had been sly enough to give them no satisfaction.

She had remained there all day, mingling with the ever-growing crowd, discussing the case with townspeople whom she knew only by sight, rubbing shoulders and talking with utter strangers; she had walked home at dusk with a new feeling of consequence, with her head higher than usual, and with her heart pounding. As she prepared her supper she had even ventured cautiously to sing a few notes—the first in more than a year.

Anticipation of seeing her name in print once again had affected her so queerly that she slept little during the night and was up and waiting agitatedly for the rural delivery-man. But when she had read the morning papers, when she had seen herself through the eyes of those reporters, she had been stunned, stupefied.

"The person living nearest to the scene of the tragedy is Mary Holmes, a middle-aged, slatternly creature who occupies a wretched hovel and runs a small chicken ranch at the rear of the Ethridge

estate," the first account ran. Mrs. Holmes had read on dizzily, "She is reputed to be a drunken, irresponsible character of violent temper and eccentric habits, nevertheless she shows surprising intelligence and unmistakable signs of education. She was positive in her statement——" etc.

The other paper had been equally uncomplimentary. It referred to her as "the goose woman" and it described her as "a queer, bedraggled, old hag with the stride of an Amazon and the airs of a queen."

Mary Holmes had torn the papers to bits, and later, when representatives of the afternoon papers came to interview her, she had refused to talk to them. But the Ethridge case had grown in importance; the Chicago papers had rushed men to Westland by the first train and these newcomers were even more inquisitive than the local newsgatherers. This morning, in self-defense, Mary Holmes had wired up her gate and nailed a sign to it which read,

KEEP OFF. REPORTERS TRESPASSING ON THIS PLACE WILL BE SHOT.

She sat now inside the open window of her front room where she could watch the automobiles coming and going and hear what the occupants said when they stopped to stare at her premises or to

read her sign. Evidently the term "goose woman" had stuck, for she heard it over and over again. The manner in which it was used, the laughter and the comment evoked by her warning sign, were so offensive that she turned for comfort to her gin bottle.

As to the crime itself, it had created a genuine sensation. The murder of a man as prominent as Amos Ethridge was bound to prove front-page news, for he was more than a figure of local importance. To begin with, he was, or had been, a man of immense wealth—the richest man in the whole state—a political power, and in all probability the next Governor. Moreover, the manner of his slaying, the circumstances surrounding it and the evident ferocity of his assassin, had rendered the crime peculiarly shocking. He had been shot to death, riddled with seven bullets, while returning to his home late Thursday night. His body had not been discovered until the following morning; then it was found lying in a lane which connected a back road with the rear of his handsome estate and upon its breast was laid a cross made of two dead twigs which had been hurriedly tied together. Neither the body nor its immediate surroundings revealed any clue to the identity of the slayer; nothing indicated any reason whatever for the crime unless a letter found in one of Eth-

ridge's pockets was an indication. This letter, which, by the way, was delicately scented, had come through the mail and bore the local Westland postmark; the writing upon the envelope was in a woman's hand, and inside was a sheet of plain notepaper containing the one word, "Thursday." There was no signature.

Why, in the first place, a bachelor who could come and go at his will should make use of a narrow, unlighted back road instead of the broad, macadam thoroughfare which passed his massive front gates was puzzling; why that cross had been laid upon the body; why, in fact, anyone should wish to kill Amos Ethridge—all were matters of pure conjecture. Questions like these lent mystery to the affair, and that laconic, perfumed note which might have been either a warning or an assignation spiced it with a suggestion of scandal just sufficient to intensify general interest.

Mary Holmes dozed in her rocking chair. She was aroused by the blare of an automobile horn and by the sound of voices. A car in which were several men had stopped before her house; one member of the party had stepped down and was trying to disengage the wire fastenings of the gate; another, with a press camera over his shoulder, was getting out. The man at the gate started to climb the fence, but he was halted midway by a chal-

lenge from the house, and looked up to discover that a tall woman in a faded gingham dress had emerged upon the porch and was facing him threateningly. She was a vigorous woman, long-limbed and erect, and she carried her chin high. In spite of her ill-fitting garments, her flat, shapeless shoes, and her untidy hair, there was an air of command about her and an appearance of some consequence. That which caused the fence climber to freeze into immobility, however, was the sight of a shotgun in her hands.

"Hello! You're Mrs. Holmes, I take it," he began, cheerily.

"Get off that fence!"

"Tell her who you are," one of the fellows in the car directed. The photographer hurriedly opened the clasps of his camera case.

"We're newspaper men from Chicago. We've been sent down here on the Ethridge case and we—"

"If you are reporters, you can probably read," Mrs. Holmes told him. "What does that sign say?"

"Now see here, this is a big story and it's getting bigger every hour. You can't shoot us for trying to get the facts and—"

"Can't I?"

"You knew Amos Ethridge, didn't you?"

"Perhaps."

"You heard the shots, Thursday night?"

"Did I?"

"That's what you told the local reporters. Come on, talk to us. We want to get your picture, too."

"I've been talking to you and you heard what I said."

"But, Mrs. Holmes—"

"You want a picture, do you? Bah! You're all alike. Vultures! Jackals!" The woman's voice rose in sudden anger. "You read what these Westland papers said about me, didn't you? Well, get out!"

"Mr. Ethridge used this road a good deal, I understand. At night, I mean? You probably saw or heard his car that night? All we want is a brief statement from you." Unobtrusively, the speaker shifted his weight, lifted himself further over the fence. "We city men have an altogether different theory from these—"

The woman on the porch cocked her shotgun and raised it, saying, grimly:

"I shall count three."

"Oh, come now! Don't be foolish."

"One! Two!"

"Go ahead, Jim!" urged the camera man. "She can't pull anything like that. If she shoots you, it'll make a corking picture."

The trespasser now had one leg over the top strand of barbed wire and he steadied himself upon a post—neither a graceful position nor one of great stability. He was about to let himself down inside the yard when Mrs. Holmes cried:

"Three!"

Simultaneously she fired. The dry grass and weeds beneath the teetering figure exploded into a dusty cloud as the charge of bird shot mowed a path through it. With a yell, the man flung himself backward, leaving a fragment of his trousers leg upon the fence. He picked himself up and shook a fist at the woman, shouting:

"You damned old harpy! I'll have you arrested for that! What d'you mean, anyhow—?"

He paused as he heard the ominous click of the second barrel, and hurriedly backed closer to the car. The photographer made haste to follow him.

"Don't let me catch you climbing my fence again. I keep this gun for hawks, but it will do as well for buzzards!" Mrs. Holmes' voice was harsh and strident; she appeared to tower higher as her rage mounted. "Poke fun at me, will you? Well, you've got something nasty to write now, so be as nasty as you can. You want to know who killed Amos Ethridge, do you? Rats! You don't care who killed him. All you want is to choke your filthy papers with scandal and lies and

dirt. It's all you can write, all you can think about. Lies! Dirt!" She had quite lost control of herself now and broke into an incoherent torrent of invective. She checked it only when the objects of her wrath had slammed the car door and the machine had rolled away.

When she was alone she strode back into her house and stood the fowling-piece in its corner, then tramped about the living room, her head high, her back straight, her deep bosom heaving. So! They'd get a story out of her, would they? Publish her picture! Use her for a bit of local color, ridicule her, abuse her! Well, she could give them back as good as they could send in the line of personal abuse. The scum! The blackguards! She was sorry they had fled so swiftly—while her mouth was still so full and her tongue so bitter. For once in their lives they had heard something which they would remember. They knew now that she was no common country lout, no mere "goose woman."

As she reflected more calmly upon the encounter she felt some pride in the way she had carried it off. It had been her scene: she had held the center of the stage and she had played it well—as well as anybody could play such a scene, upon short notice. After all, only an artist can rise to dramatic heights; none but the finished actor can por-

tray sincere emotion. She, "a bedraggled old hag!" *Old*, at forty-five! "A drunken, irresponsible character of violent temper!" She wished now that she had shot that reporter in the legs.

The next day, not only the local Westland papers, but also the big Chicago dailies, carried amusing and highly colored accounts of that shotgun encounter, and Mrs. Holmes derived a grim enjoyment from reading them. Again she flared into fury at the uncomplimentary things they said about her; but indignation is a fire that quickly burns itself out and it gave her some satisfaction to read of her victory. This satisfaction increased as she reread the stories. After a while she experienced an actual thrill at realizing that she had become a figure of importance in the biggest news sensation of the day and that people from Maine to California were reading about her. They saw the name "Mary Holmes." And after twenty years! She wondered if any of them would remember having seen it before.

The mystery of the murder, by the way, still remained unsolved. The clues left by the slayer of Amos Ethridge were so slender that no progress had been made in piecing them together, and, naturally, theories of various sorts began to be advanced. Several of the Chicago papers declared

that the cross of twigs on the dead man's breast proved it to be a Ku-Klux outrage, and this explanation was generally accepted, for Westland was a stronghold of the Klan and Ethridge was a bitter enemy of the organization. What is more, an impressive demonstration had recently occurred here. There had been a parade and a midnight conclave at which scores of new members had been initiated. Special trains had been run from distant points, hundreds of automobiles had assembled, thousands of robed and hooded Klansmen had gathered in the light of a tremendous fiery cross erected on a hill just outside the city limits.

Out of this occurrence had sprung a bitter political quarrel, for Amos Ethridge had boldly proclaimed through the press that the Governor was an avowed Klansman and that the conclave had been planned with his knowledge and consent. Ethridge had gone further; he had charged that the entire machinery of law enforcement was Ku-Klux in sympathy and that the state had been betrayed, delivered over to the Invisible Empire. He had promised to adduce irrefutable evidence, proof positive, when the time came. His accusations had met with a tremendous popular response and, as a matter of fact, it was largely as a result of this outspoken support that he had announced his intention to run for Governor at the coming election,

pledging himself, if successful, to wage relentless war upon the hooded order and to restore the government to the people.

Threats against his life had followed. He had received Ku-Klux warnings forecasting much the same end as had actually overtaken him. His murder upon the very eve of the campaign convinced most people that the charges voiced by the Chicago newspapers were indeed sound.

But those charges were not so readily accepted by the citizens of Westland. Amos Ethridge had been a great man locally and during his lifetime his power had been such that few of his neighbors dared speak a word against him, but, now that he was dead, tongues began to wag. From various quarters there arose a hissing of scandal. People voiced openly what they had never ventured to more than whisper—*viz.*, that Ethridge's private life had not been above reproach, that there were chapters in it which would not bear the light of day, and that the authorities would have to look further than the Ku-Klux in order to find his slayer. What about that "Thursday" note that had been found in his pocket? There was more than one husband or lover, yes, even more than one father, in Westland who smarted under a sense of outrage and who had reason to thank God the millionaire was dead. Let the police discover what

woman's fingers had penned that note, then perhaps the mystery could be solved. It was even whispered that out of the solving there might result a scandal more painful to the community than its present sense of loss, and that under the circumstances it might be the part of wisdom to let sleeping dogs lie. Such came to be the general feeling in Westland.

As the days crept by and no arrests were made, certain citizens began to nod and to speak guardedly of "influence." The out-of-town correspondents heard these whispers and promptly wired them in. As a result a special prosecutor was appointed by the state and he came on to take charge of the investigation.

On Thursday evening, a week after the crime, Gerald Holmes drove his new car out the road towards his mother's farm. It was early, nevertheless it was quite dark. As he crossed the bridge at the Italian settlement he noticed that his right headlight suddenly went out, just as it had gone out a week previously at this precise point. Tonight he did what he had done on that other occasion; he stopped, got out, and went around to the front of the car to investigate. Gerald did not pretend to much knowledge of automobiles, but this coincidence, it seemed to him, proved precisely what he had told the dealer; to wit, there was a

loose electric connection somewhere and a certain sort of jar destroyed the contact, dislocated something or other. The dealer had promised to have it fixed but—well, this was a sample of his work. Fine way to turn out a brand-new car, even a cheap one!

Gerald shook the lamp gently, but it appeared to be rigidly attached to its support and the bulb did not relight. He was afraid to shake it too hard, for fear of pulling it off—this was no rugged, hand-made, foreign car. Then he fingered aimlessly at the wire beneath the lamp, but that, too, was disappointingly secure. He reasoned that the wire must run in under the hood of the machine and somewhere attach itself to a battery or a dynamo or a generator or something, so he stepped back, lifted the bonnet, and peered inside. He could make out very little indeed, even with the aid of a match, and recognized nothing that could by any possibility be considered a dynamo or an electric lighting plant. The vital organs of an automobile, it seemed to him, were unnecessarily complicated: he would have considered many of them utterly useless except for the fact that here and there "things" were revolving. He quickly discovered several wires, any one of which might be the cause of his trouble, so, striking a second, then a third match, he gingerly tested them. He had

not gone far when he uttered a grunt and jerked his hand away, incidentally bumping his elbow against something sharp and hard. Automobiles are full of painful corners. He dropped the match and swore, whereupon he heard subdued laughter and through the gloom discovered a couple of figures near by.

"Do you fellows know anything about automobiles?" he inquired.

There came an answer in Italian, so he confessed, ruefully: "Well, neither do I. I can drive 'em, but I can't fix 'em."

He closed the bonnet, passed back through the glare of his good headlight, and, stepping into the car, drove on. It was a relief to note that the car ran as well with one light as with two. Some car! This little buggy might have her faults, but he loved her, just the same. It was the first automobile he had ever possessed and his pride of ownership was inordinate, for it represented a terrible extravagance. It was a lovely shade of blue, too, the particular shade he adored, and he would have immensely enjoyed showing it to his mother. That, however, was impossible. He could never make her understand. Involuntarily, he fetched a deep sigh and shook his head.

Instead of proceeding on past the poultry farm and parking his machine in the grove near the

entrance to the Ethridge lane, as he had done a week previously, he turned in through a break in the fence before reaching the farm, and killed his motor under a wide-spreading tree. It was barely possible that the police might be watching the scene of the tragedy, and in any event it was not a nice place to be on a dark night. Gerald hated dark colors, dark nights, dark deeds, and the thought of what had occurred a week ago tonight in that lane, half a mile ahead, gave him a sick feeling. He felt jumpy as he set out across the open pasture land towards the lights of his mother's cottage, and more than once he cast apprehensive glances back of him or stopped to listen.

Soon the familiar outlines of chicken houses and runs appeared, then a dog barked. It was Jack, the old Airedale. The dog recognized Gerald's voice and greeted him with extravagant affection when the young man dropped down inside the fence. Mrs. Holmes had heard the disturbance; she opened the kitchen door and peered out, inquiring guardedly:

"Is that you, Jerry?"

"Hello, mother!" Gerald entered and closed the door behind him, then stooped to kiss the woman's upturned lips. When his face was within a hand's breadth of hers he checked the movement and cried, reproachfully. "Oh, *mother!*"

Mrs. Holmes answered petulantly: "Very well! Don't kiss me if you don't want to. But for Heaven's sake don't start in with a temperance lecture!" There was a moment of silence, then: "You don't understand what it is to live all alone, in a place like this. *You're* never lonesome. You have people to talk to. You see things and hear things—"

"All right, mother. I won't lecture. But you know how I feel about—drinking." The young man bent his head and pressed his lips to the woman's cheek.

"When did you get back from Chicago?"

"Today. This afternoon."

"Have a good trip?"

"Yes. They liked my drawings and gave me some more work. I got a new story to illustrate, too. But—I was all broken up over the murder, of course! I left here the next morning, you remember? I didn't hear of it until that afternoon —then just the bare account. Gee! It was a shock. I felt as if I ought to get on the train and come right back. I wanted to be here for the funeral, too, but—I couldn't get my money in time and I didn't dare try to borrow from that editor."

Mrs. Holmes smiled faintly, almost sneeringly. "The funeral went off all right without you."

"You don't understand how I felt towards Mr.

Ethridge. You never liked him, after what he did for me, but I did, for he gave me my start; made it possible for me to have a career. Not many rich men would interest themselves in a ragged, obscure, young—"

"In the son of a 'goose woman!'" Mrs. Holmes broke in. "Of course you read the papers and saw what they called me?"

Gerald flushed. "Yes. Yes, I read—everything."

"The rotters! Well, you're not ragged now, are you?" Mrs. Holmes stared at her son, and in her gaze, oddly enough, there were both pride and resentment. As an artist she hated Gerald, as a man she—well, he was her son, blood of her blood. What she beheld was a handsome youth—a boy of sufficient good looks and charm of manner to warm any mother's heart. Gerald's face was frank and sunny; it was unusually expressive, too, but curtained with that veil of conscious repression common to supersensitive people; it was the eager, dreamy face of an artist, a writer, a musician. The boy's faults and his weaknesses, Mary Holmes well knew, were the faults and the weaknesses of most dreamers.

She had never dared to analyze very closely her feelings for this child of hers—it is doubtful if she would have succeeded very well had she tried—for

ever since she had nursed him at her breast he had roused within her emotions that violently clashed. There were times when he filled her with a great satisfaction, a sublime contentment, then again times when she hated him fiercely—yes, hated him! There were occasions when she lavished upon him a sort of savage affection—these occasions were rare, by the way—and again occasions when she treated him with a cruelty that was positively feline. Nearly always, however, her feelings were mixed and he excited that distressing warfare within her bosom. He was at once her comfort and her torture, her blessing and her bane.

"Gee! It gave me a fright to realize that I hadn't been gone from here for half an hour—an hour at most—when it happened," Gerald went on. "Why, I might have been involved in it!"

"*You?* Nonsense! Whoever killed Ethridge drove up in an automobile and left it standing in that pine grove across from the lane. I saw the tracks the next morning." Young Holmes started: he eyed his mother apprehensively. "By the way, you must have met Mr. Ethridge on your way back to town?"

"N-no!"

"You *must* have met him. You couldn't have had time to walk to the end of the street-car line before he came along. It didn't seem to me you'd

been gone ten minutes when I heard his car pass and then the shots. Of course, it was longer than that—"

"Have you talked to the police?"

"Certainly! They questioned me the morning of the murder and they've been here a couple of times since."

"Did you—tell them about those—those automobile tracks? I suppose of course they noticed them?"

Mrs. Holmes nodded. "Sure! You couldn't miss them—they were as plain as the nose on your face."

"Have they formed any suspicions?"

"Oh, dozens, I dare say! But I guess they haven't made much actual progress. My belief is they don't want to discover who did the shooting."

"You mean on account of the Ku-Klux—?"

"Ku-Klux nothing!" Mrs. Holmes exclaimed. "The Ku-Klux didn't kill Amos Ethridge."

"Who did?"

"A woman."

"What makes you so positive?"

"Why, the circumstances; the evidence; the things I saw on the spot." The speaker seated herself and began to rock vigorously. As she bent her mind upon the task of visualizing the scene of the tragedy, her gaze became preoccupied, her face

changed. Her features were puffed and coarsened by drink, to be sure, but upon them now was stamped an expression indicative of more than ordinary mental power; it was as if a lamp had been lighted behind a dirty, cobwebbed window-pane. "To begin with, the number and the location of the bullet holes told a story. There were seven of them—he was shot to pieces. She shot him twice, so close that there were powder burns on his shirt; then she stood over him and emptied her automatic into his body. It must have been an automatic, from the number of shots. For that matter, we picked up the empty shells where they had been ejected. Another thing, she must have known this back road well, and that lane; she must have known he'd have to get out and open the gate. That proves she had often been to his house with him, doesn't it?"

"But why would he travel this road at all when the macadam leads right up to his gates? The papers ask that?"

"Politics! He was in the race for the Governorship and he had enemies. Probably he knew they were watching him. No candidate for the highest political office in the state could afford to have it known that his private life was corrupt."

"Hm-m! Even yet I can't see what makes you so positive it was a woman."

"You're as stupid as the police! If there had been one bullet hole, or even two, it would have indicated a man's hand. But those other five shots were fired by somebody in a frenzy—somebody who was hysterical—completely out of his head. Or hers! It was the act of an insanely jealous woman—or—or a man like you."

"*Mother!*" Gerald protested, sharply. "Don't talk like that, even in fun. The mere fact that a fellow can draw, has an eye for color, is no sign that he's effeminate."

"Oh, don't worry! This is just my own theory—"

"Pretty weak, I'm afraid."

"—and I don't intend to tell it to the detectives. There are a lot of people in Westland who would rather see Amos Ethridge where he is today than in the Governor's chair. And I'm one of them. Look at that cross over his heart and that letter in his pocket. D'you think a man would have stopped to make a cross out of twigs and lay it on his breast? No! More power to the woman, I say. The hand of God directed those bullets and the hand of God will protect her. If we had more women like her we'd have less unhappiness, fewer ruined lives and—and blasted careers. He had the money and the looks to do anything. He was a whited sepulcher!"

"He had the money to send me to art school, too," Gerald countered, with some feeling. "And to pay my way for four years. Just because he saw one of my drawings on a paper bag—full of eggs! You never thanked him. You hated him for it, but—"

"*Thank* him? For making an artist out of you? *An artist?*" Mary Holmes uttered a scornful sound. "You were enough like your father without that."

Gerald sighed and shook his head in discouragement. His mother was indeed difficult—a queer woman. "Let's not talk about him or about father," said he. "What I came to see you about is the case itself. I—I wish to Heaven I'd been here, so I could have prevented those wretched newspapers—I'm afraid you'll be called as a witness next."

"Well, what if I am called?"

"Why—*think!* You must have been hurt by what they said. If you go on the stand they'll want to know all about us, past history, everything. The lawyers will dig it out and the newspapers will make the most of it."

"Humph! Maybe they'll treat me differently when they know who I am."

Gerald stared at the shapeless figure in the rocking chair for a moment, then reluctantly he made

up his mind to speak as gently as possible, but as plainly as necessary. "Mother, dear, you don't understand what it would mean, for you can't see how you—well, how you have changed! It hurts me to say it, but I'm afraid the papers wouldn't treat you as sympathetically as you imagine, or as you deserve. It is so much easier to ridicule than to sympathize or to condone."

"Oh, I see! Meanwhile, you're speaking more for yourself than for me."

"I'm speaking for both of us! Can't you understand that I'm having a hard battle to make something out of myself? Why handicap me more? Westland isn't a large city—"

"And of course you couldn't be known as the son of the 'goose woman'! Your friends would sneer at you!"

Gerald defended himself hotly: "I'm not a cad. I'm not ashamed of our poverty. But I do have some pride, some decency, and I associate with the best people I can. It shocks me, it breaks my heart to see you steadily deteriorate. I've done what I could to stop it—"

"What have you ever done, except preach?" Mrs. Holmes broke out, angrily.

"I *never* preached! Please, *please* don't let's quarrel, or at any rate let me say what I have to say first. You resent my profession because my

talent—what little I have—came from my father. You actually hate me at times, because when I was born your voice went. As if that were my fault! I can understand that, after a fashion, but other things I can't understand. For instance, why have you always tried to strangle whatever there was in me? Oh, you have! When I used to sing or play, it threw you into a rage and you whipped me. Why, just think, I might have inherited your musical talent! When I tried to draw pictures you slapped my hands. Thank God, Mr. Ethridge saw something in my drawings and encouraged me to defy you and—and make something of myself! You yielded finally because you felt sure I'd fail. When I made good you refused to let me come home; threw me out; said you never wanted to see me again."

"When you're like this I certainly do hate you," Mrs. Holmes admitted in a voice totally without feeling. "You are your father all over again."

"I know! And you blame all this"—with a comprehensive gesture Gerald indicated the ugly, squalid, disorderly kitchen—"on him. But I don't. He isn't to blame. It's the liquor, mother. And the terrible part of it all is that—you're getting worse. Nothing I say seems to have any effect and of course you don't care what I think. But it makes you mad when the newspapers say it. Well,

they'll say it again, and a lot more, if you become a witness in this Ethridge case. Your story will be published from one end of the country to the other. That would end me—my career, I mean."

"*Your* career! What do *you* know about a career?"

"Not—not as much as you know, of course. But, mother, you must have some pride left in that career of yours, in your name. Surely drink hasn't entirely killed your self-respect. Even though my feelings and my future are matters of indifference to you, do you want the whole world to know that you were deserted by your husband and became a—well, a drunkard and a woman of ill repute, as the papers had it? Do you want them to know that the notorious 'goose woman' in the Ethridge case is really the once glorious Maria di Nardi?"

The object of this appeal rose and tramped about the room. In spite of the fact that she was not very sure of her movements, in spite of her untidy appearance, heightened by the drab, stringy hair that drooped carelessly upon her neck and forehead and the slipshod manner in which she wore her garments, there was nevertheless an air of importance about her and a dignity to her carriage.

"So! I'm a drunkard, a common woman, a low

character—all those rotten scandal sheets said! And my own son agrees—tells me so with his own lips!" The speaker's voice was hoarse with passion, vibrant with dislike. "You dare to say such things to my face! . . . You want to know what ails me, what has become of my pride, what has driven me down into the mud and keeps me there. Well, it isn't the liquor. It's—it's *you!*"

"*Mother!*"

"Oh, I mean it! D'you think I drink because I like the stuff? I drink to kill what's in me here!" Mrs. Holmes clutched fiercely at her bosom. "It stupefies me so I can't think, so I can't remember. I'd have died, otherwise. You took my voice—"

Again Gerald uttered a cry of protest, but the speaker ran on, "You robbed me of my one great talent, my glory. Yes, I *was* glorious! Everybody said so. Kings and queens were at my feet, the world worshiped me. *'Career'! I* had a career—but you killed it. *You!* When you were born you changed me from a nightingale into a frog. Where would I live if not in the mud? D'you wonder I detest you when I think of what you did? . . . You're beginning to understand what a career means and it frightens you to think of losing it. You're beginning to understand that it means more than money, more than friends, more than love, more than anything in this whole world.

That it's bigger than all of them. Well, it ought to make you feel like an assassin, for when you killed my voice you did more than ruin Mary Holmes, your mother; you murdered Maria di Nardi, the opera singer, the artist, the greatest contralto in Europe. In Heaven's name, haven't you done enough, taken enough, without robbing me of what little comfort is left? A chicken farmer. Me! A—a *'goose woman'!"* Mrs. Holmes threw back her head and laughed wildly. "What a joke!" She sank heavily into her rocker and swayed her body from side to side. "Oh, my God! What a joke!"

Gerald rose and laid a hand upon her drab, uncombed hair. He could remember dimly, as if in some childhood dream, when that hair had been shiny and fragrant and almost golden in color and when it had been proudly worn. That memory left him low in mind and sick in body. "Is it altogether fair to hold me responsible for the loss of your voice?" he inquired.

Mrs. Holmes shook off his hand, crying: "Don't paw me! 'Fair'? Is anything fair? Has life been fair to me?"

"Perhaps I shouldn't have spoken as I did. But don't misunderstand me. I've lived long enough to learn that there are forces outside of ourselves that are too big, too resistless, to be overcome, so I

don't blame you for the way you feel, mother, for what you've done or for the dreadful change that has come over you. I don't even reproach you. I only pity—"

"I don't want pity!" the woman cried, furiously. The gin she had drunk earlier in the evening had failed this time to stupefy; it had merely deadened what was gentle in her and roused what was savage and hateful. Emotionally she was in turmoil. The truth of Gerald's accusations had engendered blind resentment and a fierce impulse to defend herself, to fight back, to hurt him as he had hurt her. A rat will bite when crushed.

"I had something in mind to tell you the last time I came out," the boy was saying, "but you were in no mood to listen. I must tell you now, in view of what has happened this week. I've been working hard and getting ahead slowly. It won't be long, I hope, until I can make a home for both of us—for all three of us. I'm going to—get married."

Mary Holmes stared at him dully. Here was another shock—to think of Jerry as no longer a boy, but as a man old enough to consider marrying. "You can't get married. Who'd marry you, the 'goose woman's' son?" she inquired.

"That's what I'm getting at. I don't propose to be known as the 'goose woman's' son. I propose

to take you out of this if you'll let me. I propose to have you come and live with us and leave all this behind, if—"

"Then you've picked out the girl?"

Gerald nodded. He flushed, and his sensitive, eager face was slowly illuminated, glorified, by an expression his mother had never seen it wear. It was an expression, by the way, that caused the years to roll back and remembrance to smite her. He was, for the moment, the living image of his father, and the likeness almost wrenched a cry from her lips. "She's very beautiful, mother, very talented and very fine." The boy's eyes were fixed and shining; a breathless, reverent quality had crept into his voice, and it was plain that when he mentioned this girl his soul bowed in worship and his heart paid homage. "She is infinitely superior to me, of course. That's what makes it so wonderful, so incomprehensible. I want you to—well, to make yourself over into what you were so that she can meet you and know you."

There was a moment of silence. Mrs. Holmes broke it by exclaiming harshly, "Forget it!"

Gerald had hurt her bitterly tonight. He had rubbed salt into her wounds. She had fallen low; she had become ugly and old and contemptible, had she? Instead of sympathy he gave her a sort of supercilious pity and implied that she was unfit to

meet his sweetheart until she regenerated herself. Instead of sharing her sorrow he went out and made his own life, made for himself a career such as he had robbed her of. The injustice of it! Well, this would be their hour of reckoning, the hour when she would compel him to take up and share the burden that had bowed her shoulders. Those alcoholic demons in the back of her head were dancing dizzily and it gave her a prodigious, wicked satisfaction to realize that she had the power now to humble his spirit as he had humbled hers.

"Forget it, Jerry," she repeated. "You can't get a girl like that to marry you."

"I can if we stop right here, mother, and if you'll let me help you—er, get back on your feet."

"She wouldn't have you—not the kind of a girl you've been talking about." Mrs. Holmes giggled malevolently. "You see, my boy, you haven't any name to give her."

"Not much of a name, of course, but I'll make one. I'll make it something to be proud of."

Mrs. Holmes rose, walked to the cupboard, opened its door, and took out a thick drinking glass and a square-faced bottle. Slowly she poured the tumbler half full of gin, then drank it; her eyes as they met those of her son were hostile, there was malignity in her gaze. It was an act of deliberate,

calculated defiance, for never before had she taken liquor in his presence. Gerald looked on incredulously.

"You don't understand English," she said, harshly. "If you're old enough to run around with women and think about getting married, I guess you're old enough to stand some plain talk. You give me enough, God knows! A little of your own medicine won't hurt you. What I mean to say is this—your father and I were never married."

Gerald gasped; his face whitened; a look of fright, of abject misery, crept over it. "I—should have known better than to talk to you when you've —when you're like this," he groaned. "You're not serious, mother!"

"Oh, yes I am! I mean exactly what I say. You're forever telling me unpleasant things about myself; now I'll tell you some. I'll have to go back and explain, so you'll understand. . . . Opera singers, in my time, were about what they are now, and the profession was about the same. A girl had to exercise every means at her disposal to get to the top. It was the price. Success in any art must be paid for; every great artist has to make some sort of sacrifice. I made mine, but the reward was worth it. It was worth *any* price. Art is so much bigger, so much more important than other things—everything else is so small, so

trivial, so false and so fleeting. I was young, I had sex appeal, and I had a voice. I used them all to get ahead. I had temperament, too. I lived every rôle I played: I put vitality and fire into them. When I was on the stage they used to say I was a flaming genius. Flaming!"

Mrs. Holmes tramped about the room as she talked; beneath her feet the bare floor boards creaked.

"I've told you how my big success came abroad. You know all that and how I was anticipating the day when I could come home and achieve my supreme triumph, here in America. How I met your father—in Paris. It wasn't his first affair, nor mine, but it was the first time I had ever been genuinely, madly in love. I didn't know I had it in me. I was a perfect fool. Most women are, by the way, at one time or another. He hadn't a thing—money, I mean—so I gave him what I had earned and what had been given to me. I showered him with gifts, spoiled him, turned his head. He took it all and we lived wildly, extravagantly, drunk with each other's love. That temperament again!

"I suppose it had begun to pall on him even before we learned that you were coming, but he didn't show it. When we discovered that I was going to have a baby I suppose we talked about mar-

riage—people usually do. Probably that helped to spoil things. Perfect love, perfect romance, was one thing; marriage, squalling children, milk bottles, dirty dishes—that was another. He was an artist. You came between us even before you were born.

"He couldn't bear to see the change in me. My appearance got more and more on his nerves. He quit finally—went away. That was a terrible shock to me; it was enough to kill most of the affection I might have felt for you. Oh, I know it sounds unnatural, incredible! That's because you can't understand how some people are constituted. You're full of story-book sentiment; this was real life. Neither of us was domestic. You won't understand, either, when I tell you that his desertion wouldn't have left any serious results on me; they said, as a matter of fact, that it would make me even a great artist—having suffered. But at least you can understand how it turned me back to my work with a more passionate devotion than ever, since it was all I had left, all that was real and substantial and satisfying. My voice had never been so splendid as it was during that period. My friends told me that a miracle had occurred and that I possessed the most beautiful voice in the world. They worshiped it. They, and I, blessed you as the cause of it.

"Then you were born. . . ." Again Mrs. Holmes turned her eyes upon her son, and now they were brilliant, feverish; her face was working. "You know what happened! For a while, the doctors encouraged me to believe that my voice would come back. That was to keep me from killing myself. But it didn't come back. It was gone, lost to the world! There were artists in the company who would have strangled you, gladly, and hung for it, if it would have brought back Mary Holmes's voice. That's how much they thought of it. That's what a truly great voice means.

"You wonder why I've never been a real mother to you. God! You've been a living reproach to me; every day of your life you have tortured me, stuck knives in me. As if that weren't enough, you've grown into the very image of your father—you're like him, inside and out. I suppose this girl feels towards you the way I felt towards him—so far as she's capable. But I'll bet she won't marry you. Not now she won't." For a second time the speaker giggled.

Gerald flinched at the sound, but he did not raise his head. "It seems to give you an unholy satisfaction," he said, wretchedly. "I wonder why?"

"'*Why*'? Why not?" Mrs. Holmes allowed a hiccough to escape her lips. "Turn about is fair play, isn't it? Maybe you'll shed some of your

fine airs, now. Maybe you'll quit nagging me, quit this 'holier-than-thou' business. Why shouldn't you help me carry my load? . . . Well, why don't you answer? What have you got to say?"

"Not much"—Gerald rose wearily and took his hat—"except to curse the day you tasted liquor for the first time. If you were in your right senses you would never have told me this. You wouldn't—couldn't take such devilish joy in causing me pain. You would have carried this secret to your grave. I dare say you expect sympathy, but what about me, the fellow who has always cherished an old-fashioned reverence for motherhood and who believes in pure women and such things? You mentioned the hand of God, a while ago. The hand of God is on you, mother; it's on both of us. I—I'm afraid it will destroy us both." Without another word Gerald walked to the door, opened it, and stumbled out into the night.

II

The time was when Westland had been a first-class theatrical town and most of the good road shows had played it. But conditions had changed. Chicago was only a few hours away, picture palaces had been built, and now the old West Theater, the city's leading playhouse, ran a

stock company. It was a good stock company, however; Amos Ethridge, the owner of the property, had prided himself upon being a patron of the drama and he had seen to that; in consequence a number of well-known artists were usually featured upon the West's billing. This season the most popular, if not actually the most prominent, member of the Ethridge players was Hazel Woods, the youthful leading woman. Mr. Ethridge had hired her out of a New York dramatic success and Westland considered itself fortunate in having a real Broadway favorite to worship.

Stock engagements in small cities like Westland are often both profitable and pleasant, for salaries are good, the players form new friendships, they enjoy an agreeable social life, and receive numerous courtesies and advantages not infrequently denied them in larger cities. In Miss Wood's case, for instance, Ethridge had put a charming little house at her disposal, rent free, there being no really first-class residential hotel in Westland; and there she reveled in the unfamiliar joys of housekeeping and entertained as much as her arduous duties permitted. Being a very pretty, very sprightly young woman, she had quickly made herself popular.

Through Amos Ethridge she had met Gerald Holmes. She and Gerald were about the same age, but in experience he was much younger than

she, and this fact, perhaps, as much as his shyness, his modesty, and his undeniable genius had engendered in her a desire to "mother" him and to help him along. Some men awaken in women an impulse to hover them, and Jerry was one. But not many emotional young women with abundant personal charm can successfully maintain a maternal attitude towards an attractive and magnetic young fellow, no matter how humble and how reverent may be his regard at the beginning. There was only one possible outcome to this affair. Gerald fell head over heels in love and, having nothing, he magnificently offered to share it all with her. Hazel had astonished him by accepting. Eagerly, and yet with caution, she became engaged to him; she promised to marry him—some time.

Tonight as Gerald parked his car near the stage entrance of the theater a few minutes after eleven he experienced his first genuine regret at having permitted himself to fall in love. What his mother had so brutally told him an hour before left him dismayed, sick. All the way in from her farm he had asked himself whether he should tell Hazel and risk—nay invite her to break the engagement, or whether he should deceive her. His duty seemed plain, but the mere possibility of losing her was unbearable. He was in turmoil.

Members of the cast and some of the stage hands

were leaving as he entered the stage door and spoke to Jacob Riggs, the doorman. He and Jacob were great friends and the old fellow welcomed him with a smile.

"She's dressing, but she'll be out in a few minutes," the latter announced. "Have a good time in Chicago?"

"Not exactly a 'good time,'" Gerald said, with an effort to speak naturally. "I was too much upset by the news of Mr. Ethridge's death. It must have been a terrible shock to Miss Woods and to all of you."

"Yeah!" Jacob nodded. "It caused quite a stir all over town. 'All Judah did Hezekiah honor at his death.' D'you think they'll ever find out who done it?"

"I hope so. I can't bear to think—you see, he did a great deal for me. He was a real friend."

"He treated me all right, too, but—" Jacob shook his white head. "A lot of things about him we don't know, Jerry. A lot nobody knows. The Lord works in a mysterious way and the wicked is doomed to destruction."

Here, Gerald realized, was the Westland attitude of mind. He resented it, but at this moment he was in no mood to argue the matter, so he turned away. Argument, he knew, affected old Jacob dis-

agreeably; it provoked him and excited more strongly his fanatical religious ideas and prejudices.

This Jacob Riggs, by the way, was a character. If a man may be said to smell of the theater, he did, for he had been born and reared back stage, and it was his boast that the only crib he had ever known was the top till of a Taylor trunk. The traditions of the profession were real to him, its stars were actual stars—faultless, effulgent creatures that soared through an atmosphere reserved exclusively for heavenly bodies. Their art and their persons were sacred; defects they had none. His world revolved about the West Theater and its center was the stage door where he held sway—that is to say, his material world. He dwelt also in a spiritual world, a world of distorted biblical quotations. An unusual type of doorman was Jacob. The stage crew, mindful of the fact that he had been a second-rate singing and dancing comedian in his prime, irreverently referred to him as "the song-and-dance saint."

There were times, however, when Jacob proved himself to be anything except saintly, for he had a frayed and ragged temper and he took enormous, if sometimes ill-founded, dislikes to people. On the other hand, his likes were equally decided and he had odd ways of showing them. He had taken a tremendous fancy to Hazel Woods, for instance,

and, as he put it, he had adopted himself as her "guardeen." The first she had known about it was when he moved his belongings into the vacant room over her garage and without consulting her in the least announced his intention of establishing himself as a permanent addition to her household. Argument, protest, had failed to budge him. There he stayed. He dismissed the caretaker employed by the actual owner of the premises, and himself cut the grass, attended the flowers, and generally took charge of things for Hazel.

Gerald had not waited long when he heard the rustle of a figure approaching and Hazel came running towards him with her hands outstretched.

"Jerry!" she cried. "I'm so glad! You've been gone for *ages!* Let me look at you." She faced him towards the light. "Why, you look—dreadful! What is it?"

"Nothing! I—it has been a trying week." He tried to smile, but his face felt stiff. "I wasn't sure whether you'd want to see me—" He answered her startled, inquiring glance by saying: "It's all so new! I'm not used to it yet. And then, too, those newspaper stories about my mother—"

"Silly!" Miss Woods slipped a gloved hand into the crook of his arm and snuggled her shoulder intimately against his. "Is that all? Well, I'm

glad you're back. I've a thousand things to talk about. Come along. We're going home and we'll have a bite to eat there. Where's the little blue oil stove?"

"It's outside at the curb."

"Want to ride home with us, Jacob?" Hazel inquired of the doorman. "Jerry's fireless cooker will carry four."

The old fellow grinned and shook his head. "I gotta lock up. I'll be along later."

"Think of you driving an actress home in your own car!" the girl ran on as she and Gerald left the theater. "Don't you feel rich and wicked?"

"Not as rich as I did before I paid my garage bill. I'm afraid I'll have to call this car my 'blunderbus.' "

"Nonsense! You're going to make lots of money."

As Gerald helped the speaker into her seat he could not resist planting a hasty kiss upon her cheek. "Oh, careful!" Hazel cast an apprehensive look over her shoulder, but at the same time she clutched his arm in a way that thrilled him. After a while she said: "You didn't write me, once! I'd like to know how you are going to explain that?"

Gerald answered, seriously: "That's what I had in mind back yonder. Our engagement doesn't seem real. It's like a dream. I wondered if you

really meant it; if you actually cared for me. Then, too, those wretched newspapers! I told myself you might change your mind—" He heard an incoherent but eloquent and thoroughly satisfying exclamation from the girl at his side. She drew closer and the sensation of her body actually against his rendered him dizzy. It was quite a task to drive; it required stern determination to keep both hands on the steering wheel.

Even during these few moments Gerald had become aware of some subtle change in his *fiancée*. She had never welcomed him, even before old Jacob, with such unconcealed affection as tonight. He had courted her at little parties, over restaurant tables, on the street or in public places when other people were close by, and he had never actually had her to himself for more than a moment or two; but tonight he was taking her home. For supper! He knew that the one maid she kept "slept out," and hence for once he could anticipate a real lovers' tête-à-tête, free from interruption. The prospect was enough to render him careless of traffic rules.

It seemed to him that Hazel had never appeared so lovely as when she snapped on the lights in her hall, dropped her light wrap, and turned to him with shining eyes. Her lips were parted, her face was eager; she held out her bare arms. It was a joyous, impulsive gesture of surrender; her look,

her attitude, was one of complete abandon. She melted into his embrace, warm, fragrant, throbbing; her lips clung to his and he could feel her tremble in response to his ardor.

After a while the girl withdrew herself, then, flushed and smiling mistily, she disappeared into the dining room. Gerald slowly filled his lungs. He came out of his ecstacy when he heard her in the pantry, and he followed, volunteering to lend her a helping hand. But she laughingly refused his aid.

"No. You must sit down and tell me all about your trip, and how the editors liked your drawings, and what they said, and what you thought about me, and that I'm an adorable actress and the most beautiful creature in the world and that you love me wildly, insanely."

This was an order easily filled to the very letter. While the girl came and went, Gerald talked, answered her breathless interruptions, interrupted her. He watched her with adoring eyes. When she passed his chair he detained her long enough for a caress, and when she finally succeeded, despite his interference, in setting the table, he drew two chairs up side by side.

Probably they ate something, but neither of them could have told what it was.

Hazel was indeed a different girl from what she

had ever been before. During his absence her love, it appeared, had suddenly burst from the bud into full bloom. The miracle would have made Jerry completely happy except for that hideous thing in the back of his mind. He tried his best not to think of it, but it would not be ignored; the more openly in word and deed this girl confessed her love, the more his secret distressed him.

"What ails you, dear?" she asked him finally. "You're in trouble of some sort."

He hesitated, then he broke out: "Yes, I am—frightful trouble!" Instantly Hazel's hand closed over his, concern leaped into her eyes; her tone changed as she urged him to tell her what it was.

"I suppose I must tell you, but—it's like cutting my own throat."

"Why, *Jerry!*"

"I swore I wouldn't, couldn't—and all the time I knew I'd have to. Tonight, of all nights!" He shook his head and groaned.

The girl eyed him in growing alarm. She had become quite pale when she inquired: "Is it something about—us? You don't want to—marry me?"

"Oh, nothing like that. I haven't done anything, either."

"Then it can't matter—"

"Wait! I drove out to see my mother this evening about the Ethridge case."

"Oh, please don't!" Hazel cried, sharply. "Please don't let's talk about that. I can't bear to—to hear it mentioned."

"I've got to talk about it. You see, I knew how she must feel about the way those reporters had treated her, and I was afraid it would set her to drinking again—afraid she might say something or do something to make matters worse. You've been awfully sweet about her, Hazel. Not one girl in a million would have been so charitable."

"She isn't the only woman in the theatrical profession who has fallen on hard times and—gone back. You shouldn't feel so ashamed—"

"You don't know her. I never knew her until tonight. . . . I've had a pretty bitter, pretty unhappy experience for a young fellow. I was convinced that she had talked or would talk so much that they'd call her for a witness, put her on the stand—Well, that would mean the whole wretched story, understand? Publicity! Gossip! Scandal! Lord knows it's going to be hard enough for me to face what has already come out. If it weren't for you I think I'd run away from Westland. . . . I found that she had been drinking. We always quarrel when she's like that. She misconstrues everything I say, resents everything I do; some-

thing devilish and cruel comes out in her. I suppose she must have some maternal affection for me, somewhere, but she succeeds in concealing it mighty well. It was the same as usual tonight. We had a terrible row. She broke out finally and told me how she hated me and why: told me why she has always stood in my way and tried to strangle whatever talent I had. Oh, it was—hideous. . . . You're the only person to whom I shall ever reveal what she told me: I've *got* to tell you, no matter what the consequences."

Gerald repeated in a few short sentences the story he had heard from his mother's lips. It was not a pretty story; he made no effort to soften it. "Imagine hearing a thing like that from—your mother! I try to tell myself it's a nightmare; that she didn't say anything of the sort or that she was lying. But she wasn't lying. Worst of all, she confessed casually, without the slightest feeling, that she had been—bad! That's the hardest to bear. She was a bad, a guilty woman! I—don't feel as if I could ever look anybody in the eyes again." He dropped his head into his hands.

Hazel rose and crossed the room to a window. She stood there staring out into the blackness for some time. Jerry raised eyes, bleak with suffering, dark with apprehension; after a while he got heavily to his feet.

"I can't blame you," he said, huskily. "She said no nice girl would marry me. I dare say no nice girl *could* marry me. I feel like a criminal to hurt you, but—I was desperate, I snatched at an hour of happiness. I—" He choked, then he made blindly for the hall.

Hazel turned, ran after him, drew him back to the couch upon which they had been sitting. "You poor boy!" she exclaimed. When she tenderly put her arms about him a wave of relief swept over him; he completely lost control of himself and gave way to his grief. He hid his face upon her shoulder. Like a mother she comforted him. "Nothing is going to make any difference with me, so long as you love me. She told you that no nice girl would have you and you believed her, did you? You foolish, sensitive Jerry! As if you were responsible for her sins! For that matter, I'm not a 'nice' girl; I'm a wicked actress." The speaker actually laughed, as if in relief.

"It's—it's more than a disgrace. I haven't any name to offer you," Jerry's words were tremulous.

"Sh-h! Is it your fault that you're a 'love child'? Why, my dear, that's where your genius comes from and I adore your genius as much as I adore you. Nothing can shame that. You're going to be a great artist—oh, I know it!—and I can help you; I can *make* you become great. No

man ever succeeded or failed very greatly, ever became very good or very bad, without a woman to help."

Jerry clutched the girl fiercely and she took delight in the pain of his embrace.

"You thought I'd be shocked," she went on, after a moment, "but it takes more than—well, it takes something pretty dreadful to shock a girl who has lived the way I've had to live. There's one thing the theater teaches—that's charity. Your mother, whatever she is now, was a brilliant artist in her time and we must remember that. In the theater that counts for a great deal. There are people endowed with such blazing genius that ordinary ties and ordinary conventions don't, *can't* bind them. The fire of it burns away their bonds. Yes, and how can you judge right and wrong? They're such words. Circumstances are so powerful. She told you what price girls sometimes have to pay for success—"

"You angel!" breathed the boy. "It's only good, clean women like you who can be truly charitable."

"No, no! We're all pretty much alike. Only some of us are differently placed. What we actually do is of so little consequence as against what we *are*—or what we become. She had no right to stand in your way, of course; that was

wicked and cruel; it was hideous of her to tell you this thing; but—how many geniuses are quite normal? Any great talent throws the scales off balance."

Gerald had somewhat recovered himself by now. Gently he kissed Hazel full upon the lips; quietly, reverently, but with a throbbing earnestness he said: "You're the truest, sweetest woman I have ever known and you've brought back all my faith, all my courage, all my self-respect; you've made a man of me. If you can think charitably of my mother, then surely I can. Yes, you've done a wonderful thing, for you've made me more ashamed of myself than of her."

It was late when the lovers managed to tear themselves apart and to exchange the last kiss. For some time after Jerry had gone Hazel stood where he had left her, gazing meditatively at nothing and with the faintest pucker between her brows. She pulled herself together when she heard a sound in the adjoining room, and inquired:

"Is that you, Jacob?"

"Yeah! I been waiting till Jerry went home. I wanted to talk to you."

Hazel returned to the dining room. "It's pretty late—"

"I know but—there was a couple of fellahs at the theater after you left. A couple—detectives."

Miss Woods turned startled eyes upon the speaker. "Detectives? W-what for? What about?"

"The Ethridge case, of course. They asked a lot of questions: how often was he used to coming here; did he ever come after the show, when you was alone; was you ever out to his place; what kind of friends was you and him? All that kind of stuff."

"I see. And what did you tell them?"

"I told 'em what the Book says: 'The wicked man shall fall by his own wickedness. He shall be snared in the work of his hands.' Amos Ethridge was an abomination unto the Lord and the Lord slew him with the edge of the sword."

"But surely that didn't answer their questions, Jacob."

"Oh! I told 'em he came and went here, like a lot of others—him owning the theater like he did—and you went out to his place once in a while when he was giving a party or something. About him being here that Thursday night—"

"They asked about that?"

"They were awful particular about the night he was killed. I said if he'd been here I'd of seen him, sure, and I didn't. I didn't see his automo-

bile standing outside, either. I swore positive to that."

There was a moment of silence, then Miss Woods murmured with an effort: "No doubt they are questioning everybody. I knew Mr. Ethridge well; he was very kind to me. He treated all of the company well, for that matter. Why should I wish to—to injure him? Or anybody?"

"Sure thing! That's what I told 'em. Folks have to have a reason for killing folks. You're just a sweet, innocent kid. Iniquity ain't in the innocent and nobody taketh reward against 'em. They showed me the letter that was found on Mr. Ethridge and wanted to know if it was your writing."

"Well?" The inquiry came faintly.

"Oh, I lied about that, too! I said it wasn't."

Miss Wood's knees weakened and she sat down. Her eyes were wide and frightened; they were fixed hypnotically upon Jacob's. The old man regarded her kindly, then said: "Now don't you worry. Nothing's going to happen. You go to bed. Jacob won't let nobody hurt you."

On the morning after Jerry's visit, Mary Holmes ran through a stack of newspapers and discovered, to her surprise and to her chagrin, that nowhere was her name mentioned. The Ethridge case was featured as prominently as ever, but she

had dropped out of it. In one week she had emerged from obscurity, had become a national character, and had been forgotten; it seemed almost as if she had been born, had lived feverishly, and had died, all in seven days. She did not enjoy the sensation; she was offended. The taste for publicity is like the taste for narcotics: it feeds upon itself, and, once formed, it is hard to break. For awhile Mary Holmes had walked in the spotlight; now to be elbowed aside, to be crowded entirely off the stage, caused her to boil with rebellion. Her vanity had been hurt by the first newspaper stories, it is true, but with a little imagination and some gin she had been able to ignore their mockery and to construe what remained as applause: it took some effort to picture herself as the old Mary Holmes beneath whose feet once more were the rapt, upturned faces of the world, but after a fashion she had succeeded. It was a sort of game and she had enjoyed playing it. To be robbed now of that enjoyment left a bleak feeling of emptiness, a feeling which increased when she dimly recalled her scene with Jerry on the previous evening. So he was going to get married! That would leave her more alone than ever. She was sorry she had told him the truth about himself; he was such a sensitive flower! He would probably stay away altogether, and his visits had

at least broken the deadly humdrum of this wretched existence. Any interruption, anything whatever to do or to think about, was preferable to monotony such as she endured. She realized this morning that those visits had meant more than she had imagined. Heigh-ho! About all the excitement she could look forward to from now on was being called as a witness in the Ethridge case and getting back into the newspaper columns in that manner. But there was no certainty that she would be called. Her love of the dramatic made her wish that she had a really sensational story to tell. It would be thrilling to take the stand and give testimony that would electrify the court, the whole country. There would be some fun in that and—

Her mind envisaged a new thought and she considered it while feeding her poultry. When she had finished her work she walked up the road and spent a long while studying the scene of the tragedy and carefully exploring the ground. When she returned there was a deep frown of preoccupation upon her face, but her eyes were bright and there was a purposeful set to her features.

Later that day she assured herself that some destiny must have shaped her thoughts, for Mr. Vogel, the new prosecutor, drove out from town and interviewed her. With him he brought Westland's

chief of detectives, Lopez. For a while Vogel questioned Mrs. Holmes perfunctorily; then his bearing changed; he became alert, attentive.

"Why didn't you make all this known before?" he inquired. "The police talked with you and so did the newspaper men."

"Yes," the woman laughed harshly. "They talked with me; and then they went out of their way to make me ridiculous. The idiots! The swine! Why should I tell them anything? Come here, I want to show you something." She led her callers out of her living room and into a squalid bedchamber adjoining. The bedclothes had been slept in repeatedly and had not been made up; the room was indescribably dirty, its windows were unwashed. It was precisely the sort of den in which a woman like Mary Holmes would sleep. Too bad she was not a credible witness, Vogel thought. If she were anything except what she was he could put some confidence in her, make use of her, but—

"Sit down." Mrs. Holmes cleared two rickety chairs of their burdens of old clothes, dusty newspapers, and what not, then from a dark corner she dragged forth a rusty trunk. The lid of this she flung back: it was partially filled with old scrapbooks, programs, lithographs, photographs, and the like. She rose with her arms full and dumped her

burden upon the bed, then thrust a huge volume into Vogel's hands. "Run through that and then ask me why I tried to shoot that penny-a-liner! Those are clippings. Most of them are foreign, but you'll find some in English."

Vogel turned the first few leaves of the book, then he looked up incredulously. "What the devil—? Are *you*—Maria di Nardi?" he inquired.

"I am. Or I was."

"Good Lord!" The prosecutor stared at Mrs. Holmes. Lopez looked over his shoulder and read the yellowed headlines. Together they examined the photographs on the bed and compared them with the huge slattern before them. The pictures were old; those in street dress were quaintly out of date, but many were in operatic costumes which the men readily recognized. All showed a young woman of magnificent physical proportions and considerable beauty. In the shapeless figure and the bloated face before them none of that beauty remained; nevertheless the likeness was recognizable.

Vogel rose to his feet in genuine agitation. "This is astonishing! I knew of you, of course, although I never heard you sing. I—it's—incredible!" He stared about at his surroundings. "Do the newspapers know who you are?"

"Nobody knows who I am, except my son."

"You have a son?"

Mrs. Holmes nodded. In a few words she told her callers about Jerry, and from her tone as much as from her words they drew pretty accurate conclusions as to the relations existing between her and her boy.

For perhaps an hour Vogel and Lopez took turns questioning the woman, then they drove her back to town with them. In Vogel's office she repeated her story to a stenographer, read it in typewritten form, then swore to it.

When, at last, she had been sent home, Lopez exclaimed:

"Well! That's the biggest wallop I ever had. It upsets everything."

"Don't you believe her?"

"Sure! She *must* be telling the truth, but you're going to have a hard job to make a jury believe her."

"We'll have to check up, of course."

"That'll be easy. But remember, she's 'queer.' Everybody knows she's drunk half the time. She's a notorious character and—well, she'll prejudice herself."

"I'll take care of that. I'll see that she makes a good impression. I'm going to get her out of that pigsty, dress her up, and put her in a hotel and make her look like a human being. I'll take her

off the whisky, too, and make sure that she doesn't talk until I'm ready to have her talk. This isn't an ordinary case, Chief; it's a newspaper trial. When the time comes I'm going to explode something."

"Oh, it'll be a big thing for you if you can get a conviction where our local people have failed to even start anything. But speaking of explosions, what about the Woods girl? This kind of blows up our theory about her, doesn't it?"

"We'll have to wait and see."

"Shall I show that 'Thursday' letter to the reporters? They're after me every day to see it. They know about as much as we do."

"Show them nothing until I tell you to. Now then, locate that automobile with one headlight just as quickly as you can and bring me the name of the man who drove it."

The next day Mary Holmes hired a neighbor to take charge of her poultry farm, then she dressed in her best, packed a few belongings in a valise and went to a hotel in town, where she found a room already engaged for her and a woman awaiting her arrival. The stranger proved to be a matron from the girls' reformatory. Together the two women visited several shops and department stores and made numerous purchases. A hair dresser and a manicurist were at the hotel when

they returned; with their aid and under the matron's directions Mary Holmes went through quite a transformation. Later in the afternoon she put herself in the hands of a facial masseuse.

Mrs. Holmes experienced a great pride and a great satisfaction in her changed appearance, also a growing elation at the full realization of her new situation. She would have been thoroughly contented with the state of affairs except for one thing —she discovered that the matron had gone through her valise and removed her bottle of gin, her storm anchor. She hinted that she was quite tired and let down after the day's excitement and felt the need of a little stimulant, but the matron told her firmly that she must do without. It was Mr. Vogel's orders. Mrs. Holmes argued that she had a bad heart and was subject to "low" spells; her doctor had prescribed a small nip of liquor, several times a day—not enough to be intoxicating, of course, just sufficient to keep her poor heart going. He had recommended whisky, but gin was so much more easily obtained. As a matter of fact, good gin, real gin, was being made everywhere. Anybody could make gin, whereas most of the manufactured whisky nowadays—well, it wasn't whisky at all. A person could never be sure it hadn't been distilled in some zinc automobile tank and wasn't actually poisonous. If her companion cared to se-

cure some good, safe gin—for medicinal purposes—Mrs. Holmes could put her in touch with a cheap and reliable source of supply. Three-fifty a bottle. It was dirt cheap!

But the matron did not drink gin and she declared very firmly that she did not propose to let her charge drink any. That, in fact, was the principal reason for her presence here, and Mrs. Holmes might as well make up her mind right now to indulge in nothing more heart stimulating than tea and coffee until Mr. Vogel was through with her.

This domineering attitude resulted in a stormy scene during which Mrs. Holmes indignantly demanded to know if she was free, white, and twenty-one, or if she was Mr. Vogel's prisoner, his slave. The matron informed her coldly that she could consider herself anything that pleased her, but if she insisted upon disobeying the prosecuting attorney he could find ready means of committing her to some place where she would be forcibly restrained from making a beast of herself.

In spite of her pleasant surroundings, Mrs. Holmes slept badly that night and when she awoke she was irritable, her nerves were unstrung.

In his investigation of the Ethridge murder Mr. Vogel's diligence was not prompted solely by an impersonal desire to solve a mystery and to bring the perpetrator of a dastardly crime to justice.

Few officials are animated by motives so simple and so public spirited. He had not asked to handle this case; the assignment had been forced upon him by reason of the widespread interest which the press awakened in it. Quite naturally, therefore, he had determined to get as much publicity as possible out of it for himself. To that end he had kept in close touch with the newspaper men and periodically had fed them enough news, both real and imaginary, to keep the case, and his name, on the front page. But reporters are wise and worldly; daily they were becoming more difficult to handle; some of them had begun to refer rather bitingly in their daily stories to his lack of progress and several had told him that they would be called in before long unless there was something doing. Had Vogel been entirely unselfish he would have welcomed an opportunity to work unhindered and unembarrassed, but as it was he urged them to wait and promised important developments in a short time. They waited. Westland waited. The country waited.

Vogel kept his promise. He sent for the reporters. He kept them waiting for an hour before admitting them to his private office, then he asked them to be seated while he read them an affidavit.

It was an amazing document that they listened to—it was the stenographic report of a carefully prepared statement by Mary Holmes.

Mrs. Holmes "being duly sworn," etc., recited that about ten o'clock on the night upon which Amos Ethridge had met his death an automobile had passed her house going east and had stopped near the entrance to the Ethridge lane. There it had turned off the road into a small grove of pine trees which were visible from her front window. That which had caused her in particular to notice this car was the fact that it was running with one headlight. When it stopped in the grove, this one light had been turned off. She had wondered what anyone could be doing in that place at such an hour and had suspected that it might be somebody from the Italian settlement contemplating a raid on her chicken house. Marauders had robbed her roosts so often that she had been forced to buy a watch-dog.

She would have satisfied herself promptly, only for the fact that her son Gerald arrived a few minutes later and his coming drove it out of her mind. Gerald had remained with her until after midnight. When he had gone, apprehension, or perhaps curiosity to see if the car was still there, had prompted her to investigate. She had walked up the road, moving slowly and cautiously. She was still some distance from the pine grove when another car had approached from behind her, and in order to avoid detection in the glare of its lights she had stepped

aside into a clump of bushes. This second car had turned at the lane and had stopped, with its lights brilliantly illuminating the gate and the shrubbery on each side of it. Mrs. Holmes had recognized the driver, when he got out to open the gate, as Amos Ethridge.

Vogel paused and glanced at the reporters. They were frozen in various attitudes of attention, so he resumed his reading:

"I was much relieved to see him there and I was just about to call to him and ask him to wait a minute when I saw something very strange and startling. Suddenly, without warning, the bushes parted and a man stepped out. He was dressed in a long white cloak or mantle. I thought it must be a ghost!

"Question. Describe this man, please, as closely as you can.

"Answer. I'm afraid I can't describe him very accurately. I was nervous and frightened, anyhow, and this—this apparition made it worse. He was tall and I think he wore a mask, but I'm not sure. Maybe he just wore a hat and it shaded his face. That's all I seem to remember—a tall man in a long robe, but I heard him speak to Mr. Ethridge.

"Question. What did you hear him say?

"Answer. He called him by name, then he said

something about a woman. It sounded as if he said, 'I won't let you take her away from me.' Something like that.

"Question. You are positive that he said something about a woman?

"Answer. Yes. I remember that distinctly. Then he shot Mr. Ethridge. He shot him twice, before he could fall. He kept shooting at him as he lay on the ground. It was horrible. I thought I must be dreaming or that it was a scene on a dark stage played in a spotlight and I was away out at the front of the house—it seemed so unreal. What happened next is pretty confused. I was deathly afraid and I didn't dare cry out or move for fear the assassin might have confederates near by and they'd kill me, too. I just stood there staring and shaking. I saw the man kneel over Mr. Ethridge's body, but his back was to me. I presume he was fixing that cross of twigs. Then he got up, passed out of the glare of the headlights, and turned them off. After that, of course, I couldn't see what he did.

"Question. What did you do?

"Answer. I stood still. I didn't dare move. By and by I saw another light, across the road in the pine grove, so I dropped to my knees and crouched in the weeds and bushes. I stayed there until the other car passed me—the car with one

headlight. Then I got up and ran home. I suppose I ran home: anyhow, I found myself there with all my doors locked."

Vogel laid aside the document from which he had been reading and said:

"That, gentlemen, is the gist of Mrs. Holmes's sworn statement, which she made voluntarily. Rather extraordinary, eh?"

"Do you believe it?" somebody inquired.

"Absolutely! Chief Lopez and I questioned her carefully and we failed to shake her on any point. What's more, we examined the roadside where she claimed she hid, and we found an old glove which had lain there for some time. It was her glove. She showed us the mate to it at her house."

"Well, I don't believe a word of it!" one of the local newspaper men declared. "I talked to her the next morning—I asked her a thousand questions—and she didn't tell me any such story. It sounds altogether too theatrical. People don't happen along country roads after midnight just in time to see murders committed in the glare of automobile headlights. Why didn't she spill this sooner?"

"She says the talk about the Ku-Klux frightened her."

"She's a common drunk; she's eccentric and utterly unreliable. I know all about her."

"Indeed?" Vogel grinned sarcastically. "Then you probably know who she really is. You know her stage name." His listeners pricked up their ears, but he forestalled their questions by saying: "I'm making you boys a present of a big story that you weren't smart enough to get for yourselves. How many of you remember a grand-opera singer by the name of Maria di Nardi? Not many. She was before your time. But I remember her and you can look her up. She lost her voice right at the height of her career and dropped out of sight; was forgotten. One of the tragedies of the profession! She's living in Westland and her name is —Mary Holmes! Oh, you don't have to take my word for it. I've got her here and she can prove who she is! You can talk to her as much as you please. Break down her story if you can. It's more than I've been able to do."

"But wait!" another man queried, eagerly. "What about the one-eyed automobile and the fellow in the robe? Have you got him?"

Vogel smiled again, this time complacently. "Don't ask me to tell you everything I know. I'm giving you this story because the Ethridge case is being tried in the newspapers and because you boys have worked hard on it. I'm treating you squarely

and I expect square treatment in return. Understand? All right! Make the most of what you've got and—maybe I'll have another story for you tomorrow. Possibly this evening." With these words the speaker opened the door to an inner office and called Mrs. Holmes.

When she appeared the newspaper men eyed her in astonishment, for she was amazingly changed. She was no longer the unlovely creature some of them had seen and all of them had written about; she was a quite imposing middle-aged woman. Her hair no longer hung in greasy snarls, it was soft and clean and smoothly combed; her body had shape, and a good-looking street dress lent pleasing lines to it; there were silk hose and high-heeled shoes upon her feet. More astonishing than this, however, was the alteration in the woman herself. She entered the room with her head up and with a poise, a carriage that only the stage can teach; in her bearing was a dignity that brought the reporters to their feet and kept them standing until Vogel had introduced her and had given her a chair.

This was Mary Holmes's hour and she made the most of it. She took a tremendous satisfaction out of the evident embarrassment of these young men. They had maligned her and she hated them for it, but she concealed her feelings behind an air of modesty and simplicity which was anything but gen-

uine. She would have enjoyed nothing more than to turn the vials of her wrath upon them, to blister them with her scorn, but, realizing that through them she was talking to a vast audience, she rose to the occasion as she had risen to other rôles.

Vogel had cleverly stage-managed her appearance and she had rehearsed herself well. The result was all and more than either of them had anticipated—she scored a triumph. She was acting, of course, but what a part to play and what an audience to play to! An audience consisting of America, the world! The world that had forgotten her! Well, it would remember her now and it would throb and sympathize with her story. That story, to her mind, was infinitely more dramatic, infinitely more important, than the story of the Ethridge murder, and upon her lips it became a poignant, moving tragedy. She set the reporters afire.

Vogel had made her bring her scrap-books of yellowed clippings and her photographs; he had also arranged for press photographers and camera men from the news weeklies, for here was a subject suitable for the screen reviews. When Mrs. Holmes left the building, she faced a battery of still and moving-picture cameras, and a way for her had to be cleared through the curiosity-seekers.

Word quickly spread that an actual eye-witness

of the Ethridge slaying had come forward with an incredible story and a mob followed Mrs. Holmes to her hotel. It swarmed into the lobby and up to the elevator gates, reminding her of the crowds that had followed her in Paris, in Vienna. She would have liked to step out of her room to some balcony, with her arms full of roses, and throw kisses to the street below.

In a surprisingly short time extras were out and Mrs. Holmes heard them being shouted. They contained little but headlines and a brief statement of facts, but she read them avidly and could scarcely wait for the fuller accounts and for the arrival of the big Chicago dailies the next morning. It fed her vanity to realize that in many quarters upon typewriter keys and telegraph instruments fast-flying fingers were pounding out her life story and that it was being cast into molten metal for the world to read. Those old photographs which had lain so long in the dark were being reproduced and new ones finished! Mary Holmes, "the goose woman," had set the presses of the country a-spinning; Maria di Nardi, the forgotten darling of grand opera, was being reborn.

Sustained emotion, such as she had undergone today, demanded relief, and again she appealed to the matron for some whisky. But the latter was firm. Mrs. Holmes was too excited to eat any sup-

per, nor could she sleep when bedtime came. Habit had become fixed, restraint had only whetted keener her desire for drink, and her outraged system clamored fiercely for its accustomed anodyne. She paced the floor until long after her companion had retired.

She wondered why Jerry did not communicate with her. He must have heard those newsboys bawling "extra" by this time and— But of course he was mad at her for getting into print; he abhorred notoriety. A shrinking violet, that was Jerry! Bah! He had offered to make her over if she'd let him! Well, she had made herself over. She wished he could see her tonight.

Mrs. Holmes rang for a bellboy and asked him the earliest possible moment he could secure for her the morning papers. The boy volunteered to go to the offices and fetch the first copies off the press; that would probably be about three o'clock. This gave the woman an idea, and she inquired if by any chance he could at the same time secure for her a little stimulant, preferably whisky, although gin would do. The boy assured her that he could. He did.

Mary Holmes found pictures of herself on the damp front pages. The stories that went with them were all that she could have desired. She smiled, to be sure, at Vogel's positive assertion that

he was on the trail of "the man in the robe" and that his arrest was merely a matter of hours. Vogel was a great grand-stander. He amused the reader. She lowered the liquor in her bottle and felt her tautened nerves relax, felt a grateful ease and contentment creep through her.

When the matron came to awaken her charge in the morning she found her lying across her bed with her clothes on, and with an empty flask beside her.

There was a perfectly good reason why Gerald Holmes did not communicate with his mother that night; he was, for the time being, out of communication with anybody. Even while the evening extras were in process of printing he had been taken to police headquarters and there put through an examination sufficiently rigorous to be termed the "third degree." At first he was humiliated and bewildered, although scarcely alarmed; he answered questions frankly and fully, not realizing in the least that every word he uttered closed the net more tightly about him.

The police began by asking him about his relations with Hazel Woods, and he told them of his engagement to her. He also admitted ownership of an automobile and identified a linen dust coat as his property, although why the police had taken pains to filch it from the car and bring it here he

could not imagine. With equal readiness he admitted having driven out to his mother's farm on the evening of the murder and having left the car in the pine grove near the entrance to the Ethridge lane. Yes, his right headlight had been out of commission.

To Gerald it seemed inconceivable that these men could actually suspect him of complicity in the crime. Not until he had gone over and over the story of his trip out and back and had detailed his every action on that night without in the least impressing them did he begin to appreciate the seriousness of his situation. Why should they suspect him of the murder, he demanded to know. Why should he wish to harm the man who had done more for him than anybody in Westland? What possible motive could he have for destroying his benefactor?

They told him why, in language so plain, so brutal, that he was stricken dumb. Miss Woods had been Amos Ethridge's sweetheart and the cottage she occupied was their love nest. She was the writer of that "Thursday" note which had been found on his body, and, after the show on the night of his slaying, he had called upon her, as was his frequent habit. He had gone directly from her arms to his death.

Gerald leaped to his feet. "That's a lie!" he shouted. In a fury he struck at the speaker. No

attempt was made to quiet him; on the contrary, his inquisitors undertook to capitalize his agitation. They goaded him; they taunted him with being a fool; they told him things about Ethridge and the girl that would have driven any lover frantic. Vogel came in while this was going on, but he took no part in the proceedings. When Jerry refused to be convinced, when again he called them liars and defied them to shake his faith in his *fiancée*, they shifted their tactics and read him his mother's deposition. He listened while incredulity changed to despair.

When they had finished he told them, miserably: "You shouldn't believe that. She's—not altogether responsible. She drinks more than she should and there are times when she's apt to do or say almost anything. She's not a credible witness."

"She wasn't drunk when she swore to this."

"But—don't you see, there's just enough truth to what she says to make it all sound plausible? She doesn't know that I have an automobile. I didn't tell her because—well, because she would have considered it an extravagance, so she doesn't realize it was my car she saw pass the house. I *did* leave it at the grove and it did have only one headlight. Yes, and she saw the tracks there the next morning. But she didn't actually see the mur-

der, or she'd have told me. Why, we talked it over when I got back from Chicago and she never said a word about it! Bring her here. Take me to her. She'll set this thing straight."

"You better come clean," one of the detectives told him. "It'll save a lot of trouble and you're not doing yourself any good raving like this. You may save yourself from the gallows." In spite of himself Gerald flinched. "Pretty rotten to kill the man who befriended you. The jury won't be out twenty minutes. Why, listen to this and do a little thinking for yourself. Ethridge likes you, pays your way through art school, and one day he introduces you to his gal. You fall for her, like any sucker, and want to marry her until you discover she's his sweetie. But she knows a good thing when she's got it and she stalls you. All those Janes have a young fellow on the side! Of course you're familiar with Ethridge's habits; you know how he drives home that back way every night after he's been to see her, so nobody will get wise, and you know he has to get out to open that gate. You know every inch of the ground out there, having been raised on the spot. You buy a cheap car so you can get around—people on trolleys are likely to be seen and recognized, late at night. What's a guy like you, a picture-painter, want of an automobile, eh? All right. One night

when Ethridge has a date with your gal—his gal—you beat it out to see your mother. You're a nice, dutiful mamma's boy, only you're not living at home. No, you've got your own place in town and you leave her alone with the chickens. You park your fliv where it's handy to the lane; then you frame an alibi by calling on the old lady. But you take pains to duck just before Ethridge is due home. Fine! It's a wonder you didn't set the clock back when she wasn't looking and call her attention to it. They usually do.

"But you get a bad break—one in a thousand. Your mother goes up the road in time to see you give Ethridge the works. Tough for you she wasn't close enough to recognize your voice or see your face; she'd have kept her mouth closed if she had, no doubt. Women are like that. But, not knowing you had a car, she spills everything to Mr. Vogel, and he plays her just right. We have you covered before he brings her into town. And by the way, remember the two wops that talked to you the night you went back to hide your tracks in case she suspected you? Your right headlight was out that night, too. Why, man, everything checks up, even to the white robe, or 'mantle,' as she calls it! We find this light-colored dust coat in your car. It ain't exactly white and it ain't a 'robe,' but it's

close enough. I never saw a cleaner set-up. Better call it a day and sign on the dotted line."

Gerald spoke quietly, listlessly: "You almost make me believe I did it, but there's one thing you can't make me believe and that's what you say about—Miss Woods."

That night while his mother greedily read about herself in the papers and drank herself into a triumphant stupor Jerry sat on the edge of a bunk in the city prison.

Westland was in a furore. There was but one topic of conversation. The Ethridge case had "broken" finally and the explosion rocked the city, for nothing so fantastic as the true facts had been conceived in the most imaginative mind. To begin with, the story of Ethridge's "love nest" and its charming occupant—which, by the way, the papers featured in screaming headlines—was sufficiently scandalous to delight the prurient minded. Then, too, the identity of the slayer was a genuine surprise. A wicked roué, a seductive actress, a Cupid's bower, and a jealous young lover! It was the oldest, the most hackneyed situation known to newspaper reporting: it was hokum of the highest quality, sure-fire stuff. Anybody could write it, everybody would read it. To have the lover prove to be a base ingrate was an added touch and a tasty mor-

sel. But the thrill, the drama, lay in the fact that the ingrate's mother had actually witnessed the murder and, in absolute innocence of the part she played, had brought him to justice! Here was something stunning; here was a coincidence truly uncanny; here was the hand of God. Yes, and the final dénouement, coming right on top of the discovery of her real identity, was piling sensation upon sensation.

To the general mind it was a peculiarly satisfying case because the motives were plain and understandable and because the persons involved, outside of the unfortunate mother, excited no sympathy whatever.

Mr. Vogel came in for great praise for the expedition with which he had solved a baffling mystery; the chain of evidence he had forged was so strong and so complete that nobody questioned it. On Sunday, the day after Gerald's arrest, more than one sermon had for its text "The wages of sin," and from pulpits, not alone in Westland, earnest preachers thundered against rich men of evil life, the ingratitude of youth, and the scarlet women of the stage.

On Monday came the news that Mary Holmes was ill, completely prostrated by her son's arrest and by the frightful realization of what she had

done. This, too, was tasty. People enjoy sympathizing with the innocent.

Mrs. Holmes was indeed ill, not, however, by reason of what she had sworn to, but by reason of what she had drunk. That bellboy's choice of bootleggers had not been wise and Vogel had been summoned early Sunday morning to learn that his principal witness was suffering from "non-alcoholic" poisoning. Realizing that the truth regarding her condition would surely become known and very likely prejudice her reliability as a witness if he sent her to a hospital, he insisted that she remain where she was, meanwhile receiving, of course, the best medical attention. He it was who gave out the story of her collapse.

Gerald, very naturally, had no reason to question the cause of his mother's illness. It seemed to him that his plight was enough to prostrate her, but it destroyed his immediate hopes of disproving the charges against him. He was allowed to read the papers, but what he read appalled him. It was conceivable, of course, that his mother had actually witnessed the killing, as she maintained, and had told him nothing about it—she was eccentric; there was no telling what she might do or how she was likely to behave under the influence of liquor—but he strongly doubted this and clung to the conviction that she would confess to a wild and imagina-

tive romance or that somebody would prove her story to be, in part, at least, the fanciful creation of an alcoholic brain. But would she confess? How could she bring herself to do so? Granting that she now realized where the truth of her story ended and imagination began, an assumption which, by the way, was not likely, was her love for him sufficient to warrant humiliation? Moreover, could she undo the wrong she had done, even if she tried? These were questions Gerald could not answer. At a matter of fact, he did not try very hard to answer them, for something more important than his own welfare weighed him down and rendered him apathetic—it was the misfortune that had befallen Hazel. From what he read in the newspapers it seemed to him that he was the only person in the world who believed in her. The poor girl must be suffering more keenly than he. Hers was the greater tragedy.

Gerald was surprised on Monday to receive a visit from two lawyers, members of the leading local firm, and to learn that they had been retained as his counsel. He assumed, of course, that his mother had sent them and he took cheer from that fact, but he gained little comfort out of talking with them aside from the realization that some one stood beside him.

He had expected some word, some communica-

tion from Hazel; but none came and at last her silence convinced him that she, too, believed in his guilt. It was a bitter pill to swallow, but, after all, why should she doubt his own mother's word?

Some people are possessed of such implicit belief in themselves, such self-confidence, and such high regard for their own importance, that they assume others must share that faith. It is a form of conceit, and no doubt it is a blessing to the possessor, but Jerry was not conceited. He was a humble-minded, modest young man and he considered himself of very little consequence indeed. Upon consideration it seemed quite natural that Hazel should wish to be assured of his innocence before yielding to her impulses. Had he not tried her sufficiently without putting her love to this test? He told himself that he had.

For several days Mary Holmes remained a very sick woman. Instead of enjoying her unparalleled publicity she lay abed weak, nauseated, suffering wretchedly. When at last she was able to lift her head she eagerly demanded the daily papers and a complete account of all that had happened since she was stricken, but not until she was strong enough to sit up did the doctor permit her curiosity to be gratified. Then he told her guardedly that the "man in the robe" had been arrested and that the Ethridge case had been solved. He did not

tell her who that man was, but he prepared her for a shock. She listened incredulously, in a daze. He gave her the papers finally and left her alone to read them.

He returned to the sick room after a while to find his patient staring blankly at the wall. "I thought you might feel the need of a stimulant," he said.

Mrs. Holmes did not hear him. "Did—Jerry do it?" she inquired, stupidly.

"You ought to know. You saw him."

"But they can't—they can't do anything to him on evidence like mine, can they?"

"Why not? It's hard to get a conviction on purely circumstantial evidence, but yours is direct." There was a moment of silence. "The reporters are calling up every few hours. They want to interview you as soon as you're able to talk to them. Everybody is curious to know what you'll have to say. Yes, and the Woods girl has been here half a dozen times."

"I won't see them, nor her, either. Why does *she* want to talk to me? Hasn't she done enough? I shouldn't think she'd dare show her face on the street after causing all this and after everybody knows what she is." Mrs. Holmes found the doctor staring curiously at her; in irritation she flared out: "Why are you looking at me like that? What's the matter with you?"

"You're a queer creature. I was wondering how it feels for a mother— But you can't be much of a mother." The speaker shrugged.

"How *dare* you?" Mrs. Holmes cried, shrilly. "The idea of your talking to me like that! I'm sick. I'm in no condition to— Why, even the newspapers blackguard me! But how did I know? What could I do? I never dreamed I'd—that it was—Jerry I saw."

Without comment the doctor turned and left the room.

The sick woman raised herself laboriously, gathered the newspapers together, and flung them as far as she could. A terribly bitter but impotent feeling of resentment came over her; tears wet her cheeks. Again she had been foiled. The world was always against her. Why did everything she touched go wrong? Why was she frustrated in everything she tried to do? So Jerry had bought an automobile without telling her about it! That's where the whole trouble had started—out of his deceit. He was not only cold and indifferent; he was deceitful. He had been her ruin, from the very first; now he had ruined both of them. But he had brought this upon himself. The fool! She had never hated anybody as she hated him at this moment, for once again he had turned her triumph into disaster. . . . How could she help

hating him when he despised her and disapproved of everything she did? Well, why should she worry? There was no love lost between them and the mere fact of their relationship meant nothing. It was an irksome tie. . . . There had been a time when it meant something; he had seemed to care a great deal for her when he was a little boy. . . . He had been a pretty boy, by the way, with cute, lovable ways. Mrs. Holmes stirred restlessly and rolled her head. But no longer! All he did now was preach and voice his contempt. . . . Contempt from her own son. Well, this would take him down a peg. He'd have to get out of this scrape the best way he could: she did not propose to make a liar out of herself, to make herself ridiculous or—worse. . . . She couldn't go back on her sworn statement, even if she wanted to. That was perjury. And this Woods hussy who had played at love-making with him, what did she want? Help, of course, in clearing him. Humph! Some mothers might feel called upon to go to extreme lengths for their sons, but not she. No. She would not talk to her.

The next day, however, when Hazel Woods came again, Mary Holmes suddenly changed her mind and had the girl sent upstairs. She was feeling strong enough to sit up in a chair by this time; she steeled herself to endure some hysterical out-

burst, some extravagant appeal to her sympathies. It surprised her when none came. Miss Woods was haggard and listless, but she was in perfect control of herself. She had fine eyes, the elder woman noted, but they were hopeless and they gave the impression of thorough defeat. She made it plain with her first words that she accepted as true what had been given out through the papers—namely, that Mrs. Holmes's illness was the result of shock and maternal anxiety, and took it for granted that she was ready to join in any effort, however desperate, to undo the mischief she had caused.

This gave the mother a disagreeable sensation. She inquired coldly, "Have you been to see him?"

Hazel shook her head; her voice faltered. "How could I, after what came out? I was tried, convicted, and—publicly branded, all in one day. It would only cause him pain to see me and I can spare him that." After a moment she went on: "I've done what little I can. I've hired the best lawyers in the city, but—that is so little." Again she choked. "Oh, Mrs. Holmes, he didn't do it! I know it and so do you, but what can we do?"

"I— Nothing, I'm afraid."

"We *must* do something. Don't you understand the danger he's in? If it hadn't been for your statement—"

"Oh, of course, blame it on me!" irritably cried

the elder woman. "I suppose everybody expects me to—to go back on my oath, just because he's my son."

The girl pondered this gravely, then nodded. "Why, yes, I suppose they do expect that. It's what any mother would do. *I'd* lie. I'd steal, I'd sin, I'd do—*anything* if I had one. But—"

"He has never been a real son to me. He never cared a snap for me. He has caused me every bit of unhappiness I ever had. I've had more than my share, by the way." The speaker's tone was one of utmost bitterness.

"And yet it makes no difference, does it? You love him just the same." Mrs. Holmes uttered a derisive sound. "Oh, now! Why try to deceive me? We women nurse our babies at our breasts and no matter how old or how big or how bad they become they're still our babies and we fight for them, tooth and nail. I'm a woman. I know."

"Humph! We fight for our lovers, too. Do you, honestly—care for Jerry?"

"I love him. I want him so much that I'd—burn eternally to have him for one day, one hour. You must know how I feel. I'm speaking now to Maria di Nardi. . . . But that's not all. I care for him so sincerely that I wouldn't marry him, even if he asked me. It's too late. You understand that, don't you? He can be cleared; he

can make a name for himself; people will forget, so far as he is concerned. But they'll never forget the girl in the Ethridge case. You see, Mrs. Holmes, I'm not the great artist that you were. You had a God-given voice and a God-given genius. Maria di Nardi wasn't an ordinary woman; she was more; she was one out of many millions. She loved and she suffered more intensely than we common women; she topped greater heights and sounded lower depths. Jerry told me the story you told him. It is the divine talent, the heaven-sent gift of the artist, that we must worship, not the weak, human artist herself. The one is so insignificant, so unimportant as compared with the other."

Mary Holmes experienced a grateful warmth about her heart at these words. Here was a fellow "professional," a woman with soul and understanding. Hazel was still speaking:

"Jerry feels the same way. Even what you told him that last night made no real difference in his regard for you. When you say he is no son, that he never loved you, you are so mistaken. The world suffered a loss when you lost your voice, but you have passed on, through him, a talent perhaps as precious as your own. It must be saved—not for us only, but for the world. Your career was ruined: you can't permit his to be destroyed."

"I—I only told what I saw," Mrs. Holmes declared, uncertainly. "I swore to it and you know what it means when you swear to a thing. Why—they'd arrest *me*, for all I know."

"But there's a terrible mistake somewhere," the girl earnestly asserted. "I can't explain the car with one headlight—the car that passed you after the shooting—and yet Jerry declares he left your house an hour before the murder and drove straight to town. He's telling the truth: I *know* he is."

"They claim he laid in wait."

"But they couldn't prove it without you! It's your evidence that contradicts him. You didn't actually recognize him—you said so! And if it had been Jerry you'd have known him. Of course you would! You'd know your own boy anywhere—"

"I—was too far away."

Hazel protested breathlessly: "No, no! Think! Oh, God, think of *something* to show it wasn't he! Some action, some gesture, some peculiarity! Maybe there were two headlights on that last car and you were mistaken. It's so easy to be mistaken and just that one point might save him. Think! If it were me I'd—think of something. I'd— But they've discredited me; there's nothing I can do. I'm utterly helpless." She broke down now and, hiding her face in her hands, she sobbed

wretchedly; the tears came through her fingers. There was a poignant quality to her grief. She was very young and very frail. Mrs. Holmes realized that this tragedy had broken her like a butterfly. A curse on men like Amos Ethridge! Yes, and on men like Vogel!

After a while the mother said, roughly: "Go away! Give me a chance to think. Mind you, I don't believe it's any use but—" Again she broke out in gusty vexation. "Oh, why does everything I do turn out wrong? It's his fault as much as mine. It's easy for you to tell me to lie, to perjure myself—"

"I don't. I merely say what I'd—be willing —to do."

"All right! All right! Go along now. I'll let you know if I can think of anything, but I'm sick. That's my luck. Sick! That's how things go with me. I—I wish I were dead!"

That afternoon Vogel called at the hotel in accordance with a request from Mrs. Holmes, and after she had beat about the bush for a while she told him haltingly that she wished to make a new affidavit. There were certain points in her first one that she realized, upon careful thought, needed explanation, modification. Vogel listened until she had finished, then he said:

"I've been expecting this. Save it for the trial."

"But—the trouble is Jerry's being tried now, in the newspapers. The verdict will be in before the jury goes out."

"Don't you believe he's guilty?"

The woman averted her eyes. "There are some people who couldn't commit a murder, and he's one. There's nothing vicious about him. He liked Mr. Ethridge and he knew nothing whatever about the Woods affair."

"Nothing vicious, eh? Nothing vicious about his mother, either, I suppose?" Vogel grinned derisively. "Tell that to the reporter you shot at."

Mrs. Holmes argued feebly until he broke in: "I understand you perfectly, and your feelings do you credit. But I am a servant of the people and the law must be upheld. I sincerely regret that in doing your duty you placed your son in jeopardy, but it's not the first time such a thing has happened. Justice must be served and murder will out. Truth is more sacred even than a mother's love. It's my task to discover the truth."

"But you *haven't.* I was—mistaken," the woman protested. "I'm not going to let an innocent person suffer for my mistake."

"Mistake!"

"Well, call it whatever you want to. I gave wrong testimony. I—lied!"

"Indeed? It's too bad you're so late confessing

it. Now see here"—the speaker's tone changed—"we'll end this foolishness right now. I'm not going to let you make a monkey out of me, whatever your natural impulses may be. I dare say you'll testify that I deceived or coerced you; put words into your mouth; induced you to sign something you didn't read. We'll see! Are you going to play straight, do your duty as a citizen and stick to what you said, or—?"

"No. I can't. I'm going to tell the truth."

Vogel rose. "Thanks for letting me know. If you choose to discredit yourself in any such manner I'll make a good job of it. You see, I've looked up your whole history and I'll make you tell it to the jury, with your own lips. It won't help the defendant any, believe me."

"What do you mean?" Mrs. Holmes faintly demanded.

"You understand plain English. You'll hear a lot of it if you maintain this attitude." There was a pause. "You must have some affection for this —this 'son' of yours. That's nothing more than animal nature! But the more lies you tell, the more the jury will believe in the story you told me and swore to; the more firmly you will convince them that you are swearing falsely to save your illegitimate child."

"I see. If I don't do what you say you'll tell all about—Jerry?"

"And you! Exactly! I'd like to spare you both, but—" the speaker shrugged. "Better grit your teeth and go through with it. You can't save him, no matter what you do." With these words Vogel left.

Hazel Woods was surprised late that night to receive a telephone request to come at once to the hotel where Mrs. Holmes was stopping. On account of the hour, she took old Jacob Riggs with her. She had taken Jacob about with her a good deal this past week, not merely as an escort, but also because he displayed such pathetic eagerness to comfort and to protect her. In these troubled circumstances she was grateful for sympathy and faith from whatever source, and of all her friends he alone remained loyal; he was indeed a father. He was, if possible, "queerer" than ever, more given to melancholy quotations from the Bible; nevertheless she had a tender feeling for him and her misfortune had drawn them close together.

Hazel found a number of reporters waiting in the hotel lobby and was surprised to learn that Mrs. Holmes had likewise sent for them. Her surprise deepened, hope stirred, when the two attorneys she had hired for Jerry hurried in, explaining that they, too, had been summoned. It

was quite a group that finally rode upstairs and filed into the sick woman's room.

Mrs. Holmes was up and dressed, but she looked desperately ill. As soon as her visitors had disposed of themselves she began, in a voice harsh and purposeful:

"Get out your pencils, boys. There's another 'big' story coming. I had a talk with Mr. Vogel today and told him I had made a false affidavit. I told him my account of the Ethridge murder was a pure invention."

The correspondents exchanged glances, the attorneys leaned forward eagerly. Hazel felt old Jacob's bony fingers upon her arm and heard him mutter some scriptural phrase of thanksgiving.

"I'm going to tell you the whole truth and I want you to print it. I sent for Jerry's lawyers so they can have it put down in proper form and I can swear to it. I don't know how such things ought to be done, but—"

"Never mind. Go ahead," one of the attorneys urged.

"I'll start at the beginning and go along in my own way. Please don't interrupt me—you can straighten it out later. Well, then, I did see an automobile with one headlight pass my house that night—I was waiting for Jerry—and it stopped in the pine grove up by the lane. But that's all I

actually saw. I didn't see the murder; I didn't see the car come back. I don't know when it came back, for I never stepped outside my door after Jerry told me good night. After he left I went to bed. I heard some shots, but I didn't know Amos Ethridge had been killed until the next morning. As soon as I heard about it I hurried up there and hung around all day. That's the truth, so help me God!"

A question or two was voiced, but the woman did not answer.

"I talked to some of you boys that morning and told you all I knew, but you went out of your way to treat me contemptuously—make fun of me. I was furious when I saw your stories. . . . When I was on the stage I used to get a great thrill out of interviews; I was crazy for publicity. People in my profession frequently get that way. I loved to see my name in print. I saved every notice, every criticism; I collected thousands of clippings and preserved them. It's a mild form of disease and lots of actors have it, for they're always playing to an audience. . . . I've been acting all my life, on the stage, at home, before my friends, to myself. When you're in print, you're acting in a way, only to a different audience. When I lost my voice I lost my audience. That was the hardest thing to bear. I used to think I was the most tragic figure

in the world, but"—the speaker smiled bitterly—"I guess it was largely because I never saw my name in print, never heard it mentioned any more. What is a career except—applause? What does a person get out of it except food for his vanity? I'm telling you this to explain what happened next, for if you don't understand the sort of person I am—the theatrical temperament—you won't be able to understand what I did.

"Well, after I got over my first resentment at being ridiculed, the old disease came back. It pleased me to be written about and to have my words quoted, even though you called me the 'goose woman,' 'a bedraggled old hag,' 'a drunken harridan.' When I realized how far I'd gone back a lot of dead hopes and ambitions came to life. Embers I thought were cold. . . . The 'goose woman'! It's a good name for me.

"All at once I dropped out of the papers entirely. I got no more thrills; had nothing to think about, nothing to occupy me; I had to quit acting. I was awfully lonely. I'd had a taste of the drug: the habit was back on me fiercer than ever, if you know what I mean. . . . I dare say after this you can follow my motives. I pieced out a story to fit my theory of the killing, studied the ground so as not to contradict myself, planted an old glove—It was very simple; it looked perfectly easy; I

didn't think I was doing harm to anybody for I felt sure the murder would never be solved and I was merely bringing Maria di Nardi back to life—laying roses on a forgotten shrine. I don't know and I don't care who killed Amos Ethridge. Whoever did it had a good reason, no doubt, for he was a bad man.

"Mr. Vogel believed me. He brought me here, put me up, dressed me up, and I got so I believed my own story. It was wonderful to 'come back,' to creep out of my shell and become Maria di Nardi again, even though it was all make-believe. There's a crab—the hermit crab—that does something like that. He's an ugly, soft, misshapen thing, but he crawls into empty shells, beautiful shells, the owners of which have died, and he lives there. . . . I had a glorious time in my new, beautiful shell until I realized that I had put a noose around my boy's neck."

Mary Holmes fell silent. Nobody spoke for a moment; then somebody inquired:

"What did Vogel say when you told him this?"

"He said I was lying to save Jerry and he had expected something of the sort. Then he threatened me—"

"Threatened you?" It was one of the lawyers speaking.

"Yes. He's holding something over me. Now that I've defied him, I've got to tell you what it is—that means telling the whole world—and it isn't easy even for a 'bedraggled old harridan' like me. You see—I was never married! . . . Well gentlemen, there you have the whole story. Mr. Vogel doesn't believe it, but you do, don't you? And the public will believe it. Why, you must *know* I'm telling the truth."

The speaker stared eagerly at first one then another of her hearers. One of the older men answered her:

"It makes no difference, Mrs. Holmes, what we fellows think. We're trained not to think, but to get the news. We'll send out this story, if you say so, but are you sure you want us to? Will it do any good?"

"Then you—*don't* believe me?"

"Let's put it this way: we don't think the public will believe you. The circumstantial evidence is too strong and you haven't really destroyed any part of it. Am I right, boys?"

There was a chorus of assent and Mrs. Holmes read in the faces before her a unanimity of opinion that dismayed her.

"But I'll swear to it," she faltered.

"You've sworn to one story—"

Dimly the woman realized that the promptings

of that mother love which had finally assumed shape within her, instead of saving her son had merely served to completely discredit her, and if anything to lessen her chance of assisting him. Again she experienced that wretched feeling of impotence, of frustration. With this feeling the animal in her came to life, blazed into fury.

"You—you fools! You idiots!" she stammered shrilly. "You're doing your best to make a murderess of me. And so is Vogel. But you shan't. He's my boy! I'm a bad woman. I've been a bad mother to him, but he's fine and clean and—you shan't hurt him. He's a genius; he has my talents and his father's. It's not his fault that I'm a vain, selfish old— *He* didn't send me to the dogs! Publish my story, every word of it! D'you hear? It's the truth and I'll fight you. I'll fight Vogel. You shan't hurt him. You *shan't!* He's mine—mine—" Her voice, which had risen steadily, cracked, became an incoherent cry of anguish. With her clenched fists she pounded weakly at the arms of her chair and her face was horribly distorted.

Efforts to calm her hysteria were futile. Somebody hurried for a glass of water. One of the attorneys drew Hazel aside and tried to tell her something, but she understood nothing of what he said, for her own agitation equaled that of Gerald's

mother. She clung to the old doorman at her side, sobbing:

"Jacob! Jacob! It's too late. Nobody's going to believe her."

The confusion abated somewhat. A man was telephoning for the house doctor and the reporters were preparing to leave, when Jacob Riggs stepped forward and spoke to Mrs. Holmes.

"Don't you take on so, Miz' Holmes. Jerry's innocent and I ain't going to let anything happen to him. I know how you feel. It's the same with me and Hazel. She was given to me as a daughter, and according to Ruth 'a daughter is better than seven sons.' "

Miss Woods turned her tear-stained face towards the speaker; men who were leaving paused to listen.

"The Lord struck down Amos Ethridge, for he was an evil-doer and he delighted in his wickedness. But Jerry wasn't His instrument. He used Jacob, the son of Isaac. Ethridge was a prince of the country like Shechem, the son of Hamor. He saw Jacob's daughter and he took her and his soul clave unto her. The Bible tells you what Jacob done. Jacob slew him and the Lord was pleased and He told Jacob to arise and go up to—to somewhere and build an altar. If Vogel and the policemen had read their Bibles they'd know who killed Amos Ethridge, the son of Hamor, for it's all writ-

ten down. The proof's there. They can't blame Jerry."

"What are you talking about?" Hazel inquired, sharply.

"*I'm* Jacob!" The old man's answer was broadcast to all his listeners. A peculiar resonance crept into his voice as he quoted: " 'Break thou the arm of the evil man'! He wrought folly in lying with Jacob's daughter and I slew him—"

"*Jacob!*" the girl wailed. She hid her face in her trembling hands, for now she understood. To think that even he believed her guilty!

The others were slower, but they, too, finally grasped what it was the old doorman was trying to tell them. They shot questions at him; they scribbled down his answers. Some one dashed to the telephone and put in a call for Vogel. Mary Holmes strained forward, clutching at Jacob's arm; her lips were moving, her eyes were riveted upon his face.

Stripped of its garbled Biblical quotations, the old fellow's story was simple and easy to follow, and it bespoke a mind deranged but not wholly unhinged—the mind of a religious fanatic. Not one of his hearers doubted the truth of his words.

He loved Hazel and he had mistrusted Ethridge; he had moved out to her house in order to watch over her. What he saw had awakened in him a

great anger, but he could not make up his mind what to do about it until inspiration came from his reading. He was Jacob, and Jacob, so he read, slew the son of Hamor for the same sin that Ethridge had done. As a mark of approval, God had revealed himself to the slayer and had made him great. Once the doorman had realized that this was a divine command, peace came to his soul and he calmly prepared to obey. He bought a revolver—Jacob told where and when—and on the Thursday night Ethridge had called on Hazel he took the trolley, rode to the end of the line, and laid in wait at a spot where nothing could intervene to prevent him from doing the will of God. But he wore no robe and no disguise. When he had killed Ethridge he laid a cross upon the body and prayed over it, then he trudged all the way back to town—the electric cars had ceased running by that time. At the first bridge on the way back he had dropped his revolver into the stream. Jacob described the exact spot and said the weapon could easily be recovered.

That was about all. He voiced no regrets; on the contrary, he was genuinely exalted and it was plain that he anticipated no punishment whatever for having done God's bidding.

Vogel arrived in due time. He listened attentively to what was told him, then he questioned the

old man searchingly. After a while he and Jerry's lawyers left, taking Jacob with them. The newspaper men had gone some time before.

Hazel would have followed them, for she reasoned that Jerry would soon be at liberty and would naturally come directly here, but Mrs. Holmes was wretchedly unstrung and implored her to remain, for a while at least. It was impossible to desert a woman so genuinely in need of assistance until she had time to pull herself together, so the girl stayed.

A really noticeable change had come over Gerald's mother. The process of voluntarily stripping bare her soul and exposing it to the light had served the purpose of cleansing it and purifying it to some extent. She showed it in her words, her actions, in the apprehension she displayed at the prospect of meeting her son. She wondered if he would be harsh with her. She made pitiful, fluttering attempts to better her appearance, but her recent ordeal had left her almost helpless and Hazel was compelled to do the work of her hands.

Jerry arrived before the girl could escape—Vogel, it seemed, was capable of cutting red tape when he felt like it. He entered the room, breathless, radiant. Without a word, except the one cry, "Mother!" he ran to Mary Holmes's chair and knelt beside it. Hungrily she put her arms about

him, pressed him to her breast. Her face was glorified with an expression it had never worn before. Its grossness was burned away and in its place shone a suggestion at least of the beauty that had been Maria di Nardi's. She crooned over her boy, she patted and she petted him, she stroked his hair and kissed it.

Hazel looked on through a mist of tears. She resisted blindly when, after a while, Jerry rose and took her two hands in his.

"They told me how you stood by us," she heard him saying. "How you hired those lawyers for me and everything." He ran on with something more, something about demented old Jacob and the necessity of making sure that no punishment was visited upon him, but Hazel understood little because of the roaring in her ears.

Of course Jerry was grateful, she had expected nothing less. She assumed, however, that this meeting must be as distressing to him as to her, and she blamed herself for inflicting this unnecessary pain upon them.

Mary Holmes fathomed the cause of the girl's peculiar agitation and it indicated the change that had occurred in the older woman when she forgot herself and her own concerns sufficiently to say:

"Jerry, dear, we owe everything to this child. She did as much for me as for you. And yet she

wants to run away! If you can forgive me for what I've done you can surely forgive her."

"But he has n-nothing to forgive," sobbed the girl. "That's just it. You don't understand. Nobody understands. If I were guilty I'd deserve punishment, but I'm not. They called me a scarlet woman; they preached sermons about me; they lied and slandered—and they didn't give me a chance to defend myself! Even old Jacob believed—!"

Jerry's voice rose above her heartbroken cry and its tone more than his words quieted her. "*I* never believed it. Why, if I had doubted you, for an instant, I don't think I'd have had the courage to endure what I went through."

"*Honestly?*"

The young man nodded. In a strangled voice the girl cried:

"Then you've got to hear the real truth. Mr. Ethridge may have been a bad man, but he was good to me. Perhaps he had—ideas about me at first. I dare say he had, but he learned to know me and to respect me. He said he loved me; anyhow he asked me to marry him, and I can show you his letters to prove it. That wouldn't convince other people, but *you* know he wasn't the sort of man to marry a girl he couldn't respect. You *know* that don't you?"

"Yes. But even if it had been—otherwise, it wouldn't have made any great difference so long as you had learned to truly care for me. You taught me something about charity. You proved to me that nothing matters very much if two people really love each other."

Mrs. Holmes nodded vigorously. "Good boy, Jerry! I'm glad you're a man! She's a dear, foolish girl. She thinks she oughtn't to marry you —afraid she can't live this down. But, pshaw! Young people like you can live anything down. The world forgets. It forgot Maria di Nardi and it will forget the girl in the Ethridge case. Maybe it will even forget the 'goose woman,' if she behaves herself. She's going to behave herself. She's an old derelict and— But, for that matter, we're all three derelicts! Isn't it better for us to drift together than to drift apart? Certainly! Afraid she'll ruin your career! Humph! Why, she'll *make* it—"

The mother ceased speaking, for she realized that neither Jerry nor Hazel were listening to her. They were standing close together and looking into each other's eyes; they were quite oblivious to her presence.

Cave Stuff

HIS name was Marcel and he was a valet. He came to Nome as Colonel Waldo's "man." That was the spring after Waldo put over his big Saw Tooth Hydraulic proposition in New York and was in sufficient funds to afford luxuries. As for Marcel, it was the first time he had ever stepped his No. 7 double-A's off of hard pavements; it was his first acquaintance with what he called "the life of the raw."

This was not a phrase of Marcel's coining; he got it out of an Alaskan romance he read on the way north. He read several such stories and they caused his eyes to bulge, his heart to flutter. From them he discovered that it was a savage country into which he was going and he wondered if his nerves would endure the constant shooting. He did not like shooting; unexpected noises of any sort startled him and caused him to drop things.

As a matter of fact, Marcel had come to Alaska by reason of a geographical misapprehension, for nothing on earth would have induced him to accept a position in the wilds of the uncharted north if he had known what he was doing. When Waldo had offered to engage him he had expained to the Frenchman that the job would entail a trip across

the continent and a summer of roughing it, but Marcel had no idea where Alaska was located or what it was like. The names of these American provinces and departments were confusing; they were all barbaric and strange. He had tried to remember this one long enough to look it up in a borrowed encyclopedia and he believed that he had done so. What he read had reassured him:

Population, 1900, 1,066,300. Principal cities, Omaha, Lincoln, South Omaha, etc., etc.

One certain paragraph he had not liked so well. It read thus:

Fauna.—The large mammals are almost extinct. The bison does not occur wild. Elk, deer, and antelope are very rare, but in the western part of Nebraska there are many of the smaller animals such as wild cats, wolves, coyotes, and foxes. Twenty-three species of reptiles are found, none poisonous except three species of rattlesnakes.

Marcel had turned from reading this with a shudder, only to note something else which caused his eyes to brighten:

Flora.—The state is the meeting-ground for the floras of the Rocky Mountains and the Mississippi Valley. In all there are more than 2,700 species. . . .

That was another matter! With his taste in clothes and over thirty neckties to choose from, Marcel had gayly promised himself that it would

be a bad summer for those Rocky Mountain Floras. Enthusiastically he had pictured them: sturdy, fair-skinned, broad-hipped, deep-bosomed Amazons. Twenty-seven hundred varieties to choose from. Astonishing! But this America! So rich in beauty! "One peepin of a country." There would be "somethings doing" when Marcel Labaudie burst upon the delighted vision of those Nebraska ladies.

He took the position.

It was not until he and the colonel had sailed from Seattle that Marcel discovered his error; then it was that he talked to his fellow travelers, consulted the ship's library. Then it was that the hideous truth revealed itself. He could have shrieked.

But as he read about the "broad open spaces," "the sturdy vikings of the north," "the fair daughters of the snows," etc., a change came over him. He felt a subdued thrill, the first timid stirrings of an unfamiliar excitement. After all, this was a colossal adventure, and every man, even a valet, should experience at least one adventure.

Adventure came promptly. It came to Marcel even before he set foot upon Alaska's golden strand. The ship wallowed up to her anchorage abreast of Nome at the tail end of a sou'easter. A brisk breeze was still blowing and the distant beach was

a milky line of surf. The landing of passengers appeared to be out of the question.

But Colonel Waldo was a restless man. Telegrams were awaiting him; work on the Saw Tooth ditch was under way. He had a talk with the captain and a lifeboat was put over.

Marcel watched the perilous procedure with detached, impersonal interest. The reckless courage of those seamen excited his admiration and caused him momentarily to forget his miserable *mal de mer*. The boat plunged and thrashed; at one moment it rose almost to the level of the sloping deck where Marcel weakly clung, at the next it fell away into a watery chasm of dizzying depth; it was in constant danger of being smashed against the dripping steel sides of the Leviathan. Marcel closed his eyes, it nauseated him to watch it.

"Come along. Grab my dispatch case. We've got no time to lose." It was the colonel speaking.

Marcel followed his employer, clutched the door jamb of his stateroom for support, and inquired:

"Pardon? You were spikking?"

"We're going ashore in that lifeboat. Can't wait. Our stuff'll be off to-morrow."

"*Impossible!*" Marcel exclaimed, faintly.

"Right! Impossible—to wait." The colonel was an active, ruddy man; he grinned as he inquired: "What's the matter? Scared?"

"Of a certainty! And I am sissick!"

"All the more reason to get ashore. Hurry up."

With fingers suddenly grown numb and nerveless Marcel buttoned his overcoat to the chin, set his derby hat more firmly upon his head, and took up the dispatch case. He never argued with an employer. It was not done.

He could never recall just how he got into that lifeboat, but for days later he had a horrid, nightmarish memory of clinging to a slippery ladder with nothing beneath him except the boisterous, bottomless sea. At one moment he was suspended at an enormous height above it and he swooned with terror, at the next that frightful ocean rushed upward to engulf him and he swung out, away from the ship, like a plumb-bob. Somewhere beneath him was the boat. He heard Colonel Waldo yell at him to jump; he closed his eyes, released all holds, and kicked himself away from the ladder.

He landed with a crash. He was bruised and shaken; cold salt spray was blowing over him. But the dispatch case was still clutched in his hand.

The Nome life-saving crew were on the beach and quite a crowd from Front Street had assembled to see the lifeboat land through the surf. Marcel had assumed that all danger was past, that his great adventure had come and had passed gloriously, but the thunder of those breakers, those excited on-

lookers, those men in shiny boots and oilskins rushing back and forth along the shore, caused his heart to stop beating. He could see nothing but destruction ahead. Alas! he had journeyed five thousand miles to die twice in one day! These mad Americans! Life for them was one attempt at suicide after another!

Marcel uttered a cry of fright, for the lifeboat's rush through the surf was halted; it seemed to stop, to be sucked backward into the maw of a devouring wave, then it was swamped, crushed beneath an avalanche of icy water. After that, chaos! Marcel felt himself drowning, and the sensation was much worse than he had believed it. For one thing, it was much colder. He had been flung out of the boat into a welter of foam, a maelstrom of oars, of thrashing arms and kicking legs. And he could not swim. The sea picked him up, threw him down, swallowed him entirely, vomited him out. He strangled. He inhaled salt water and sand into his lungs.

He found himself being dragged up the beach finally; huge calloused hands were slapping him on the back, squeezing the brine out of him, kneading him, wringing him out like a wet sock. His fingers were still locked into the strap of Colonel Waldo's dispatch case. The colonel was in scarcely better plight than he. Other people were working over

him, shaking hands with him. Among the latter were several women. The colonel was laughing loudly, boisterously. He was demented, no doubt. Marcel decided that this hideous escapade had unseated the poor man's reason. No wonder. He felt certain that most of these strangers were maniacs.

An hour later (Marcel and his employer had found lodgings in a hotel and had thoroughly dried themselves out) the colonel eyed his valet shrewdly and said with a grin:

"That water was a trifle cold, wasn't it?"

Marcel paled and shuddered. "At the least it was ten degrees beneath zero," he declared.

"Kind of a rough landing for a tenderfoot, I'll admit. But what do you think of the place, so far?"

With genuine admiration the Frenchman exclaimed: "I am amaze'! Every place I look is women and children! To think all those pipple have sweemed in that cold ocean to arrive here. Thousan's mus' have perish'! *Mon dieu!* The Floras of those Rocksy Mountains are nothing to the brave wifes an' mothers of Alaska."

That was typical of Marcel's state of mind. Alaska, its climate, its scenery, its people, its customs, all were so foreign to anything he had experienced that nothing surprised him. Every-

thing was phenomenal. He was a man from Mars and he moved upon a strange planet peopled with unique inhabitants. And he was likewise a phenomenon to them. He was the first valet Alaska had ever seen; each was a revelation to the other. To him the Alaskans were all that the books had described—a race of supermen; to them he was—well, they could not quite classify him. Cooks, longshoremen, roustabouts, bartenders, waiters, all were familiar types and the north accepted them on broad and tolerant terms of equality, for the mere nature of a person's employment mattered little and no form of honest labor is degrading, but—a valet! The species was new and unfamiliar. Men studied Marcel with the same grave and earnest curiosity they would have examined an interesting beetle.

Atlin Joe Billings, head teamster for the Saw Tooth outfit, summarized pretty accurately the Nome idea of Marcel when he confessed to his fellow employees:

"He's a new bird to me an' I thought I'd seen 'em all. I've seen cowgirls an' male sopranners, female bank robbers an' men dressmakers, but I never before seen a housemaid with hair on her chest. He's a kind of he hired girl. Mind you, I don't kick how a guy earns his pay check—I've stirred blankets in a bunk-house an' I've dove dishes

in a quick-an'-dirty, myself—but there's some jobs that ain't of the masculine tense. Foldin' underclothes an' handin' socks to a gentleman that's strong enough to reach 'em himself is one. No, a bedroom ain't no workshop for a man. But he ain't a bad little Frog, at that, an' I kinda like him."

Everybody liked Marcel, for he was eager to make friends and his mind was thirsty. He hung with inordinate interest upon every word that was said to him. These brawny, sunbrowned men with their boots and their mackinaws, with their robust laughter and their scowling passions, were demigods to him; they were conquerors of a land so wild, so hostile that it filled him with awe and apprehension. When a demigod is worshiped by a mere mortal he treats that mortal kindly.

Atlin Joe Billings was in Marcel's eyes the ideal type of superman that he had read about. He fascinated the little Frenchman, awoke his deepest respect and his utmost envy. To be a man like that!

Atlin possessed a jocose spirit and, finding that no statement was too exaggerated, no lie too outrageous, for Marcel to swallow, he fed him upon both.

For example, Marcel suffered from a troublesome corn—he would wear shoes too small for him—and

one day when Atlin inquired why he was limping he revealed the cause.

The teamster was instantly all sympathy, and naturally, since he, himself, had endured such agony from corns as to practically undermine his health. Would Marcel believe him when he said that he had counted at one time over eighty corns upon his poor, screaming feet? Marcel would, he did believe anything Atlin told him. But Atlin had cured himself. How? Simply by chilling the corn microbes until they scattered, fled. He had walked from Circle City to Dawson barefooted over the ice and had never known a sick day since. The relief was unbelievable and now his feet were so hardy that he could tread on broken bottles or kick a hole through a board fence in his socks. What was more, he had cured thousands of corns for his friends and he would cure Marcel.

The Saw Tooth outfit was in camp by this time, and in a depression back of the cook-tent was a late snowdrift which the sun had not yet melted. Thither Atlin led Marcel. He took a candle box with him and this he arranged for his friend to sit upon. When the latter had removed shoes and stockings he was told to bury his feet in the wet snow and keep them buried as long as they felt comfortable. A few simple daily treatments like this and Marcel would be surprised. Atlin offered

to fetch him something to read, but when Marcel said that he did not believe he felt like reading, the teamster brought some of the other boys and they all sat around and watched the cure. Marcel, by this time, was patting his naked soles upon the snow much as a pipe organist treads the foot keys of his instrument, so the onlookers told jokes to divert his attention, and, although he could not understand them, they were very funny jokes, for the men laughed immoderately. They were genial, good-hearted fellows to take such an interest in him.

Marcel followed out this treatment religiously for several days and, if anything, public interest in it increased. Then he developed chilblains. This caused quite an argument, and Atlin finally acknowledged with reluctance that snow did not have the same curative effect upon corns as did ice. Ice, he stoutly maintained, was the death of them, due, no doubt, to the action of the ice worms.

Ice worms! Marcel had never heard of such a thing, but forthwith the teamster enlightened him. Marcel had surely noticed the thin, threadlike lines and microscopic perforations in certain chunks of ice? They were bored by ice worms. Nature had made the ice worm transparent, Atlin explained, in order to protect it from its enemies. They made nourishing soup, if properly prepared, and had

much the flavor of snails. But it was all in the cooking. Atlin had learned the secret from the Indians, and one winter when his bacon went bad he had lived exclusively on ice worms. One boiled the ice in which the worms were imbedded until they fell out, then strained off the liquid. But one couldn't boil it too long or of course the ice would melt.

Many odd and valuable things like this the eager Frenchman learned from his friend. He learned, for instance, that the Aurora Borealis is visible only on Friday nights, and that the reason a side-hill gouger has two short legs on its left side and two long legs on its right side is so that it can graze in comfort on steep mountain slopes. If Marcel should ever have the misfortune to meet one of these monsters he was warned never to try to escape by fleeing from left to right along the hillside. No, he must run from right to left. Then, of course, the animal would be unable to pursue him. On level ground the gouger is likewise practically helpless, for its deformity compels it to run in circles.

He was informed, too, that Eskimo babies are reared on whale's milk and that Uncle Sam supplies submarine milkers from the Mare Island Navy-yard to keep the little dears in food.

Much of Atlin's humor was good natured, but

not all of it. He was a hard teamster and sometimes he whipped his horses unnecessarily. Sometimes, also, he took a cruel delight in causing Marcel unnecessary humiliation and even pain. Marcel, having had no acquaintance with practical jokes, never for a moment blamed his big friend, but Colonel Waldo, who was wise in the ways of the north, warned Atlin privately, but with firmness, that the pranks would have to stop. As a result Marcel had a much pleasanter time of it—until the Dahlgren girl arrived.

Old man Dahlgren, her father, was the storekeeper and, being a thrifty soul, he got a job for his daughter waiting on table for the office force. Atlin brought her out from town and Marcel experienced an electric thrill at his first sight of her, for she was a sturdy, fair-skinned, broad-hipped, deep-bosomed Amazon. Her hair was like corn silk, her eyes were as blue as the sea; she had a wide mouth and when she smiled two deep dimples magically appeared in her cheeks. She smiled too often, by the way; nevertheless, it was a friendly smile and well calculated to work havoc in a construction camp. She turned it upon dapper little Marcel, even while Atlin, with jealous and exaggerated courtesy, was helping her down off the freight wagon, and Marcel was profoundly moved. His back stiffened, his chest swelled, he twirled

into sharper points his tiny, pomaded mustache, and when she had disappeared into the store, he inquired breathlessly:

"M'sieu' Atlin! *Who* is those beautiful lady?"

"Mushoo Marcel!" the teamster mimicked. "She's Dahlgren's daughter, Flora."

Flora! Her name was Flora! "*Some* bebe!" Ecstatically Marcel plucked a kiss from his lips and snapped it after her. "I am ravish' wit' her! She is—"

"The hell you are!" Atlin scowled at the speaker. "Looka here, Mercy Beaukoo, her an' me decided on the way out to ball up thicker'n a lot of angleworms—that is, I decided—" Atlin's face slowly cleared. "You spoke it! I mean to say she *is* some baby! An' she's bound to take a great interest in you, Marcel. I bet she never seen a real, live, high-class val*ay* before. Her an' you are goin' to run together just like so much axle grease an' water."

After the team had unloaded, Marcel strolled into the store and there found Miss Dahlgren waiting for her father to finish checking off the newly arrived provisions. With a flourish he introduced himself to the new arrival and bade her welcome.

Miss Dahlgren flushed and dimpled. It was gratifying to be so cordially received by an important official of the Company. Mr. Labaudie

certainly dressed well and had charming manners, but he was an awful cut-up. Fancy kissing a girl's hand, five minutes after meeting her! But foreigners were like that; you never knew what they'd try next. He had nice eyes and she was glad he adored blondes—it would render her work that much easier. But such a way as he had with him! Not exactly fresh—no, he was too sincere for that. Personally, Flora liked fiery people, so long as they were sincere, and it was a relief to meet a gentleman in a white shirt and a derby hat after all these roustabouts. There was no doubt about Mr. Labaudie's sincerity, for he kissed her hand a second time and pressed it. Of course he could call her Flora—everybody called her Flora. My! but he got on fast! You had to watch men with mustaches like his.

When old man Dahlgren had finished with his work and Marcel had bade her a graceful but passionate adieu until supper time, Flora asked her father just who it was that she had been talking with.

"Who? *Him?* That's Marcel, Colonel Waldo's 'gentleman's gentleman.' "

"What's a 'gentleman's gentleman,' pa?" the girl inquired.

"Why, it's a val*ay*. He darns the boss's socks and keeps his pants pressed and carries hot water

for his bathtub. *You* know—kind of a buck chambermaid."

"Well, I declare!" exclaimed Miss Dahlgren. After a moment she added. "He's a nice little fellow, at that."

Her father nodded. "Sure! We like him fine. That's the funny part of it."

Marcel returned to his living quarters, changed into his best suit, and selected the most becoming of his thirty neckties. With a pair of sharp scissors he trimmed his mustache—a delicate operation—and clipped his eyebrows. Then he steamed his face with hot cloths and rubbed in a lilac-scented cream. When a man is in love, when he has met the adorable queen of all the Rocky Mountain Floras, he owes it to her to make himself as attractive as possible. As a finishing touch to his toilet he doused himself with perfume. Too bad he was denied the privilege of sitting at the boss's table and taking food from her white hands—the ditch men with whom he ate always commented in coarse language whenever he used scents—but to-night this perfume would be a tribute to her. Incense upon the altar of a goddess. And, anyhow, she would smell him later.

Unfortunately, Miss Dahlgren did not have the pleasure of inhaling the permeating odor of musk which Marcel gave off, either at supper time or

later. The men smelled it, to be sure, and one of them tore up a floor board, declaring there must be a skunk's nest under the mess tent, but when the dishes were washed the new queen enthroned herself upon the steps of the store with Atlin Joe Billings and several others at her feet, and Marcel could not even get within speaking distance of her.

Life in the Saw Tooth camp had been pleasant and harmonious up to the arrival of Flora Dahlgren, but she proved to be an apple of discord. Her ready smile induced several of the boys to make reckless advances to her, with the result that Atlin clouded up and poured all over them. He announced one day, as he bound up his bruised knuckles with wet chewing tobacco, that he was the only out-and-out ladies' man on the Company's payroll and he proposed to maintain that distinction. There was nobody left who cared to argue the matter with him.

Despite Marcel's open worship of the camp divinity, Atlin could not bring himself to be actually jealous of the little man, for he told himself that no full-blooded, two-fisted dame like Flora would fall for a valet. Nevertheless, he did go so far as to warn the latter that he was particular what sort of people his girls associated with, and that if he ever caught one talking to a French-

man he, Atlin Joe Billings, would make that Frenchman hunt a gopher hole.

Marcel made inquiry and learned what a gopher hole is, then he laughed at Atlin's absurd figure of speech. Why, for instance, should he waste time searching for a gopher's residence? Surely not for a hiding-place in which to escape the teamster's wrath, for a grown man could not possibly penetrate into the burrow of a ground squirrel! No! The American language was beset with bewildering idioms.

Inasmuch as Atlin's duties took him away from camp during the day, Marcel managed to see a good deal of Flora, but in spite of all he could do his courtship did not prosper.

It was through her that he became aware, at last, of the odium that attached to his occupation and of the unspoken prejudice against him. He was incredulous, rather than hurt.

"But why? The colonel will tell you that of all the valets he has engage' I render the mos' perfect service. I am his jewel."

Flora tried to explain just what she meant, but as a democratic Alaskan she found it difficult to define nice social distinctions, and the more she talked the less certain she was that she made herself plain. "I can't exactly put it in words, Marcel, except that being a valet somehow ain't

a man-sized job. A valet is a—a servant and you know there ain't any servants in this country."

"Are not all these pipple servants of Colonel Waldo?" Marcel inquired.

"Huh! I should say not. *I'm* not a servant." Miss Dahlgren turned up her nose. "And say! You better not let Atlin hear you call *him* a servant. Oh, boy!"

"But I am possess' of such stupidy," confessed the man. "You wait behind the table; you rastle those grub for the boss, as Atlin says, and shoot the biscuit! I feex him up his clothes. What difference, eh? All right! I mak' the colonel's bed; Atlin mak' bed for the colonel's hosses. I swip his tent; Atlin clean him up the stable. For that he is fine gentleman and I'm servant! What you goin' say now?"

"I ain't going to say anything. It's kind of foolish when you think of it, but there's lots of foolish things in this world, and, anyhow, that's the way we look at it. If you was a regular hired man and did a man's work I'd—it would be different. But— Why, for instance, a girl couldn't *marry* a valet!"

"No?"

"Certainly not. Not unless she was a servant girl."

It took quite a while for Marcel to grasp this

peculiar attitude of mind, and, although he could see no reason for it, he became thoroughly unhappy, nevertheless. Flora, as near as he could understand her, admired only big, brave men—men who took orders for eight hours a day, but who acknowledged no master thereafter. None but the reckless, primitive, forceful type of man could win her, and Marcel acknowledged, ruefully, that those qualities did not fit him. It was just as the books had said: none but the cave-men returned with the bacon. He admired and envied the husky teamster too sincerely to experience jealousy; instead, a somber, brooding hopelessness settled upon him and he began to avoid people.

One day he borrowed the colonel's 22-caliber rifle and asked the latter to show him how to load and to fire it. The colonel obliged him, and daily thereafter Marcel spent his off hours wandering disconsolately about, popping at ptarmigan.

At first he could hit nothing, for he had never before aimed a rifle, but he practiced assiduously and he learned to take careful, unhurried sight at his targets and to hold his weapon steady. When he finally killed a bird he became very proud. It was the first blood he had ever shed, except with a safety razor, and he told himself that he was becoming a genuine "out-of-the-doors man," after the

American style. In time he surprised the cook by bringing in quite a number of birds.

Meanwhile, odd to relate, Atlin's love-affair had fallen out of joint. The blond Flora no longer appeared to derive complete satisfaction from his exclusive society, and his wit awoke no response from her beyond an occasional fretful complaint that he was about as funny as a child's crutch. When he became affectionate she likened him to a playful bull walrus and told him irritably that there were such things as good manners, even in men.

Atlin pondered the significance of this change. There was a nigger in the woodpile somewhere—or a Frenchman. He could scarcely credit the latter suspicion, but all the same he commenced a systematic persecution of the valet. He did not show his dislike to the world; on the contrary, he openly voiced his friendship, and Marcel believed him. But those were unhappy days for the little man. He was made ridiculous, made to suffer in every possible way. He endured it all with a patient smile, a look of pained bewilderment. It was the American way. Inwardly he bled.

Once he even allowed himself to be inveigled into a boxing exhibition with Atlin. He protested that he knew nothing about "the rules of the box" as practiced here: in the "gymnase" at home boxers

used their feet instead of their hands. They kicked each other. This statement provoked a shout of laughter.

Atlin promised not to hurt his little friend and playmate and literally he kept his word. All he did was to toy with him, sidestep his rushes, feint him into knots, rub the gloves in his face, flick his nose with them. It was a side-splitting performance, but when it was over and Marcel was alone he burst into tears of mortification. If only the rules of the American box permitted the kick of the feet! But no. He had made a fool of himself, as usual, and Flora had looked on.

He was not angry at Atlin; he merely despised Marcel Labaudie, the valet, the spineless, inept, incompetent servant. Oh, to be a cave man.

One day word came to camp that over on Dog Salmon Creek a miner had been mauled by a huge brown bear, and Colonel Waldo 'phoned in to Nome, inviting some of his friends to join him on a hunt. His invitation was eagerly accepted, for the great Alaskan brown bear, an overgrown cousin of the Rocky Mountain grizzly, is not common in the Nome section and is a trophy eagerly sought after. There were five of these guests—business men who welcomed this opportunity for a week's recreation.

Colonel Waldo ordered an outfit put together

from the commissary stores and directed Atlin to accompany the expedition as guide and packer, a commission that delighted the latter. To Marcel he confided:

"Say, Beaukoo, this dude-wranglin' is my dish. You savvy why they're takin' me along, don't you?" Marcel did not savvy. "Why, to do their killin' for 'em! There ain't a man in the party could hit a mule in the rump with a spade."

"You are then such a skillful marksman? What?"

"Oh, I ain't absolutely unerrin'," Atlin modestly confessed. "Of course I ain't never missed nothin' I ever shot at, yet, but you never know. If ever I do miss a bear I promise you one thing—I'll ear him down an' ride him into camp."

"You can perform those feat?" Marcel was indeed astonished.

"Sure! A bear is scared of his shadder. All you gotta do is be firm."

"But—what the colonel means when he say that feller is 'maul' by a bear? 'Maul'! She's new word wit' me."

"That's what I done to you when we was boxin', Frenchy. Bears is natural boxers. They like to dance, too. You've heard of dancin' bears? They got 'em in circuses. Why, I knew a feller up in Forty Mile one time that got tied in with an old

she bear with cubs, an' she started to waltz with him. He like to starved to death before he got shed of her. They danced for more'n a week."

"How extraordinary! *Mon dieu!* I would adore to be a member of this party," Marcel breathed.

An hour later and he found that he was a member of the party, for at the last minute Waldo drafted him as cook.

That expedition into the hills was an experience for the valet. It was his first sight of the real wilderness. The trackless, open valleys—broken by occasional thickets of willow and alder; the treeless mountains brilliant here with acres of wild flowers, scarred there by steep, naked slides where avalanches had hurled themselves headlong from the heights; the peaceful meadows, belly deep to a horse in lush grasses; the brawling streams and foaming cataracts—all were new and amazing to Marcel.

And the rough life of the camp, it was full of delights. That is, it would have been full of delights if he had been allowed time in which to enjoy them, but he was kept on the jump from dawn until dark. Colonel Waldo had provided the best for his guests and they proceeded to enjoy it all to the full. It was, "Marcel, do this," "Marcel, do that," "Where's that leaping frog, Marcel?" "Marcel,

fetch a bucket of water," "Hurry up with those dishes, Marcel, and make my bed," "Marcel, dry out my boots."

Nobody turned a hand to help with the work, for what is a valet for? Certainly valets have no feelings and require no sleep. The little man worked until he was ready to drop. It was torture for him to ride a horse, but that was about the only rest he got. Once he fell asleep and tumbled out of his saddle, which deeply embarrassed him. He uttered no complaint, however. This was that free and invigorating "life of the raw" about which he had heard so much. He knew now why they called it "raw."

Bear tracks were plentiful on Dog Salmon Creek and permanent camp was pitched there. But the hunters had little success. They rode out morning and afternoon, but were always back in time for their meals. Even Atlin Joe had to be waited upon.

It was decided one morning to split up the party and go in opposite directions, and Atlin suggested that Marcel go along with him and his two companions, to hold their horses in case they saw game. This the colonel agreed to.

"He can take my extra gun—"

"Hey, there!" one of the sportsmen protested.

"I don't want to be shot in the back by a chattering Frenchman."

"Oh, Marcel can use a rifle! I taught him to shoot my .22. I'd laugh if he got a crack at a bear and you fellows didn't. Marcel, if you get a shot, take it. Take your time and drop your bear if you can."

"*Oui*, monsieur!" The speaker smiled deprecatingly. "But I am no huntsman." Privately he decided that nothing whatever would induce him to fire at a bear and risk arousing in it a desire to dance with him.

It was not yet noon when Atlin halted his party and, with a whistle of astonishment, pointed down at an indentation in the wet moss.

"Yonder's what I mean to call a *bear* track!" The hunters stared and nodded. "He ain't far ahead of us and he'll be layin' down when it gets hot. We don't want to jump him."

"I never seen these grizzle bear," Marcel ventured. "What she's look like?"

Atlin winked at his companions. "'Bout the size of a dog, only greenish. You'll know one if you see him."

"And meanwhile don't load that gun of yours," one of the others said, nervously. "You might tremble it off."

The party rode on for an hour or more. It was

stupid sport, Marcel decided. They stopped after a while and told him to hold the horses while they went on afoot, and he was only too glad to get out of the saddle. He waited interminably. It was early afternoon when Atlin returned with the announcement:

"Well, we got him."

"No! I don't hear no shootin'. You took him by the ear, eh?"

"We ain't killed him yet, but we got him all surrounded up. He's hidin'! Come on; we got a job for you."

Marcel followed his long-legged friend for perhaps half a mile until they came to a steep, bare hillside overlooking a tangle of alders in the valley below. Then Atlin explained:

"He's in them bushes, but it's too thick to see to shoot. Mr. Thompson's over there on the other side, an' Hillker's down by them big bowlders. We got the place ringed around, so all you gotta do is go in there quiet an' scare him out. We'll get him, sure; he ain't got a chance."

"You jokin' wit' me?" Marcel inquired, suspiciously.

"Who? *Me?* He's in there, honest! Them alders is all loused up with tracks."

"I don't know—! Those grizzle bear is wild animal—!" The speaker was uneasy.

"Sure! They're *awful* wild. The minute he hears you he'll come chargin' out, hell bent. You ain't—*scared*, are you? You ain't scared of a little ol' *bear?* Well, I swan!"

"I go!" said Marcel.

Of course Atlin knew everything was all right; just the same, Marcel confessed to himself that this undertaking was not altogether to his liking. When he drew near the thicket he loaded the colonel's rifle. The shells were amazingly large; they would undoubtedly make a deafening roar if they were fired, and the weapon itself was as heavy as a cannon. He wondered if it would not be a good idea to fire the gun now. But, no, Atlin had instructed him to go quietly. No doubt the bear suspected that enemies were about, and any loud noise would merely cause it to hide itself so thoroughly that no amount of searching would discover it and thus defeat the object of the entire expedition. One had to use the guile of an aborigine in this hunting sport.

On hands and knees he crept into the covert.

The alders, flattened by the weight of heavy winter snows, made going difficult, for they grew along the ground; their trunks were twisted and their branches were interlaced. Marcel patiently crawled through, between, over, and under them. In spite of himself he felt his heart beating rapidly.

Alas! there was no stuff in him; his was the soul of a valet and it quaked at imaginary perils!

He paused after he had gone perhaps fifty yards, and listened. A queer sound came to his ears—a subdued growling and snarling, the rustle of a body moving among the leaves and twigs. So he had alarmed the bear and it was in precipitate flight. But, no! The disturbance continued in the same place. He saw a stir, an oscillation of the branches ahead of him, then he realized that there was neither fright nor menace in those mutterings. Rather they suggested playfulness. His face lighted. *Voilà!* Baby bears! Baby bears at play! What luck! With redoubled caution he pushed further ahead until the sounds were close at hand.

Marcel parted the leaves and craned his neck; what he saw alarmed yet fascinated him. He was looking into a glade, an open space a few yards in diameter, and in it three animals were disporting themselves. But such animals! They were fat and shapeless and clothed in rippling brown fur of amazing richness. That which held the observer spellbound was their size. Manifestly, they were not grizzle bears, for they were five times as large as any dog. Neither were they side-hill gougers, for Marcel remembered that gougers have long tails with red and yellow rings. These creatures had no tails at all, or practically none.

Whatever they might be, they were in a pleasant mood and totally unaware of his presence. They rolled over one another, they wrestled gravely, they sat up in a ludicrous manner and pawed and struck at one another for all the world as if they were boxing after the absurd American fashion. Marcel decided they must indeed be bears, but what to do next he did not know. After a while he turned around and cautiously crept back out of the thicket. *En route* he did some thinking; for the first time he began to doubt the entire sincerity of Atlin's friendship.

The teamster was poised expectantly upon the hillside, his gun in readiness; he was surprised when Marcel emerged from the alders and stood up. The latter gesticulated excitedly, pointed back at the thicket, and in vigorous pantomime tried to convey the intelligence that he had encountered an extraordinary situation and wished further advice.

Atlin approached down the slope, walking carefully and with lowered eyes, as if looking for something.

Marcel danced; he grimaced elaborately in an effort to convey by silent speech the fact that in yonder he had discovered not one but three bears—or what he believed to be bears—but Atlin was not skilled in lip reading. He proved, however, that he was proficient in another accomplishment.

He found what he was looking for. He stooped, picked up a rock, and threw it at the man below with surprising accuracy and amazing violence. Marcel dodged. He could scarcely believe his senses.

The teamster armed himself with a second missile and stood poised, frowning; with a gesture impossible to misinterpret he motioned to his friend to crawl back into the brush or take the consequences.

Of a sudden, Marcel became very angry. Was he indeed a servant, subject even to the commands of Colonel Waldo's mule-skinner? Or was he a man? He remembered what the colonel had said that morning and he was seized with a grim, a malicious determination. He would go back in yonder, but he would not frighten those bears out for the amusement of Atlin and his friends; he would shoot one himself. He would shoot two, all three of them, if they did not secrete themselves without delay. He would show no mercy. He reentered the copse and Atlin scrambled back to his post.

The little man followed the marks of his going and his coming until again he heard the bears snarling and gamboling, but it was difficult to obtain a position from which to fire with accuracy, because the leaves were thick and the branches clutched at his gun barrel like so many fingers.

Through the canopy of twigs over his head he could make out Atlin on the slope above, and his attention was arrested by the latter's extraordinary actions. He was lifting, straining at a huge slab of rock, and even as Marcel watched him he managed to dislodge it. With a shove the teamster sent it rolling down the hillside. It came in leaps and bounds, gaining momentum rapidly; onward it rushed until with a crash it flung itself into the thicket.

Then occurred an amazing phenomenon—something which froze the valet's blood in his veins. Close at hand and where he least expected it he heard a roar, a deep, rumbling rush of breath and sound impossible to describe, and simultaneously the underbrush oscillated to the movements of a gigantic body; it parted and there before his bulging eyes an apparition upraised itself more dreadful than anything he had ever dreamed about. It was a bear, but a bear cast in an enormous mold. It was infinitely larger than those other bears. It was mountainous. No doubt its astonishment at seeing Marcel equaled his at seeing it, but the bear recovered more quickly. The fur along its back rose; its muzzle wrinkled, curled back into a terrifying snarl; its little, red, piggy eyes gleamed wickedly. With surprising ease, considering its stupendous bulk, it reared itself upon its hind legs

and came striding, wallowing through the brush toward the Frenchman. Alder trunks as thick as a man's leg parted before it like so many grass stalks.

Marcel was aware of but one emotion—a soul-stirring amazement at the size of the monster and its apparent lack of fear. It was not in the least running away. Then he realized the truth—it intended to dance with him!

These thoughts must have flashed through his mind like lightning, for the bear was not forty feet away from him when he first saw it. He must have acted with almost the same celerity. He cocked his rifle and raised it. Colonel Waldo had warned him to take his time! He aimed as deliberately as he was accustomed to aim at the bright, bead-like eye of a ptarmigan, then he pulled the trigger.

Sacre! What an explosion! The recoil of the rifle knocked Marcel off balance and he found himself sitting in the mud. Quickly he scrambled to his feet and ejected the spent shell.

The bear was no longer striding towards him, its towering head level with the alder tops. It had lain down. It was quaking, twitching with terror at the sound of that firearm. No wonder—! Marcel started, for another bear, a second bear—evidently one of the playful trio—crashed into

view, paused beside the one that had lain down, and smelled of it. This was a smaller bear, but it was large enough. It espied Marcel as he lifted his gun barrel and slowly took aim, and it emitted a loud snort. Even as the man pulled the trigger he sensed rather than actually saw its two playmates moving through the leafy background.

The second shot set the marksman back in the mud again, but he recovered himself as quickly as possible. Alas! These bears were impossible to hit. The brush was bending and threshing as an avalanche of brown rushed through it—two avalanches! He fired at the nearest, without further effect than to evoke a hoarse growl, then he turned and fired at a brown rump as it disappeared.

By now it seemed to him that the thicket was alive with lunging monsters, that he could hear them crashing, smashing through the undergrowth on every side. Then he was startled nearly out of his skin by a fusillade of shots from the mountain above, followed by wild yells from Atlin.

Marcel would have turned and bolted, but it was impossible to run through the thicket and, besides, he was too terrified to move. He could plainly see the first bear he had shot at crouching in the brush, ready and waiting for him to turn his back. Its eyes were fixed upon his in an unblinking stare. The hair upon his head stirred; he could feel it rise.

He forgot the gun in his hand. Coldly the monster glared at him through the alder trunks. Marcel grew faint.

By and bye his gaze, hypnotically fixed upon the menace, wavered, was drawn to something beyond. He changed his position, stretched his neck. He could not believe his eyes. Yonder were two bears! Lying side by side! They were dead! They must be dead! Miracle of miracles! he had killed two grizzle bears; he, Marcel Labaudie, the valet! He was sure they were dead, for when he spoke to them they did not answer, nevertheless he was not sufficiently sure they were dead to approach them. He was unfamiliar with the habits of wild animals; perhaps they were merely "playing raccoon" as the local saying went.

His attention after a while was attracted to another quarter, and he investigated cautiously, timidly. What he discovered convinced him that he was indeed quite out of his mind, for he beheld still a third bear lying upon its side and breathing its last. By this time nothing had the power to deepen his astonishment.

He heard loud halloas finally, heard his name shouted, and he answered. There was great relief in the tones of the Nome sportsmen when he made them understand that all was well with him, but that he needed assistance.

After a while they and Atlin came to him, crawling, fighting their way through the brush; breathlessly they asked what had happened.

"Did you see him, Marcel?"

"He didn't hurt you, did he?"

"Oh yes, I seen him," Marcel told them, quietly. "I show him to you—all t'ree of him." He pointed, and his companions stared; they swore weakly, eloquently. Cautiously they pushed forward and examined first one, then another of the fallen giants. They were speechless, incoherent. Three huge, Alaska browns; an old she bear that would stretch eleven feet as she lay, and a pair of two-year-old cubs weighing six hundred pounds apiece! shot by a French valet, in an alder thicket! There was no language suitable for the occasion, nor for the emotions the hunters experienced at thought of their own parts in the exploit.

They told Marcel after a while that immediately following his shots a bear had bolted out of the thicket and had nearly run over Atlin. Atlin had fired five times at it, but it had escaped. They had supposed, of course, that it was the animal which Marcel had started.

"I hit him, all right," Atlin asserted. "He was limpin' some when I let up." These were practically the first words the big teamster had uttered.

It was Hillker who said: "Atlin, you're a dam' liar! I saw him when he broke cover and he was limping then. You emptied your gun and never touched him."

Marcel stared at Atlin Joe silently for a moment or two, and in his eyes was much the same expression that still lurked in the glazing eyes of that mother bear. To him had come a new understanding of Alaskan bears and Alaskan men, at least men of this type, and he tried to put it into words.

"I got somepin to tell you fellers. This long time Marcel Labaudie is funny joke for you. He's valet. He's servant man. You mak' him wait on you, cook your grub, wash your dish. You call him 'Frog.' You brave huntsmen—oh yes!—but you awful 'fraid of grizzle bear, so you pick nice place for runnin' away; then you send for Marcel and say: 'Marcel, go chase him out! He's little feller, no bigger as dog!' You lie to Marcel. Then you t'row rock on him." The speaker had grown very white, his eyes were blazing. "Now Marcel goin' tell you what he t'ink 'bout you. He t'ink you t'ree, gret big lazy, lousy bums! He don't do nothin' more for you."

With these words the speaker turned, made his way out of the alders, and, without a look behind him, trudged back to his horse, mounted it, and rode off.

There was genuine excitement at the Saw Tooth camp. The hunters had returned, bringing with them three magnificent pelts and the amazing story of Marcel Labaudie's feat, but Marcel himself was not one of the party and nobody knew what had become of him. He had turned his back upon his companions and ridden away; the wilderness had swallowed him up.

Colonel Waldo had listened with an ominous lack of comment to the story told him when Atlin and his two sportsmen came in, and he had ordered camp broken the next morning. He could well understand Marcel's anger—his was no less—and he had supposed, of course, that he would find the latter at headquarters when he arrived there. He was concerned to learn, upon reaching home, that nothing had been seen of him. When the second night passed without word of the missing man, he took steps to send out searching parties.

Now nothing very serious had happened to Marcel. He had ridden away from his companions, boiling with resentment—resentment so all inclusive that it took in even Colonel Waldo—and he had struck back in the direction of the main outfit, but it was late when he started and he spent that night in the open, without a fire. He was cold and miserable and in constant terror of being devoured by gougers. It was a horrid experience. All the

next day he drifted about aimlessly, with nothing to eat except blueberries, and not until the late Arctic twilight was darkening into night did he see the first sign of a human habitation. Then he stumbled upon a prospector's camp. He spent the night there. He ate much, slept much, learned much. He and the prospector talked about bears, and side-hill gougers, and ice worms, and submarine milkers, and men like Atlin Joe Billings. His new-found friend had no sense of humor; he saw nothing funny, for instance, about rolling a bowlder into a bear's nest. He told the wanderer a good many things of which the latter was ignorant, and when Marcel left he was athirst for vengeance. His very soul was outraged and he was all the angrier because of his present plight. It was a fine, Gallic gesture to denounce those men who had imposed upon him and then to stride away in dignity. But he had ruined it all by getting lost. Marcel could have wept scalding tears at thought of this, for again he had made himself a "laughter stock."

It was not the old Marcel Labaudie who rode into the Saw Tooth camp that afternoon. His neat blue serge suit was torn and muddy, his little derby hat was dented and out of shape, his linen was a disgrace. He was grimy, sweat-stained, his face was overgrown with a blue stubble of beard,

and around his mouth was the deep discoloration that only huckleberry juice can impart. But his black eyes shone like jet buttons and his mustache was still twisted into the likeness of two tiny rapier points.

There was a great to-do when he was recognized. Men came running; they shouted greetings to him, shook his hands, clapped him on the back. They all talked at once, so that he could understand little of what they said, but instead of the ridicule he had anticipated they actually appeared overjoyed to see him. Nowhere among them did he descry Atlin, and he inquired as to the teamster's whereabouts.

Atlin, he gathered, had that day been fired and he was at this moment getting his things together. Marcel pushed through the crowd and like a bee returning to its hive he made for the bunk tent. He did not walk, he trotted. The men swarmed after him.

Flora Dahlgren had wept all that day, but she heard the commotion and raised an eager, tear-stained face from her pillow. Hastily she dried her eyes and, still sobbing, ran out of her father's tent. She caught a glimpse of Marcel as he entered the door of the big bunk tent, much as a wren darts into the knot-hole guarding its nest, and she sped thither.

An altercation was under way when she arrived, and she paled, clutched at her bosom, for she heard the shrill, vibrating tones of Marcel's voice and the angry bass of Atlin Joe's. They were quarreling. Atlin, the brute, would kill him! Flora moaned in terror. Better that poor, heroic Marcel had fallen a prey to those bears or had perished wretchedly of exposure than that he should excite the teamster's devastating anger in this manner.

Marcel was hopping in rage; words tumbled from his lips—words like "false friend," "pig," "assassin." French words, too, of obscure meaning, but with a dreadful, wrath-provoking sound.

"You got eighty corn on your foots and you froze 'em off, eh? Dog! Eskimo babies got whale for mother! Oh-h—you devil-devil! Those grizzle bear is scare' of his shadow. He's dance for week wit' frien' of yours. Liar! You push off the mountain those rock to destroy poor Marcel. Traitor! Miserable Judas—!"

"Who's a Jew?" Atlin cried, resentfully. "Beat it, Frog! I lost myself a good job over you an'—Shut up! D'you hear?" He rose, scowling, but the other continued to upbraid, to accuse:

"You boil ice worm till he fall out. Ho-ho! You mak' lesson on the American box. You're fightin' man. You chase pipple in gopher house. Dirty swine! Vermin! Cheese bug!"

Atlin appealed to the other employees: "Get him out if you want to save him. Dam' if I'll stand bullyraggin' from no—"

He was interrupted by a loud, stinging slap on the cheek from Marcel's hand, and he uttered a bellow. He made ponderously for the gadfly.

Flora Dahlgren screamed and tried to fight her way into the tent, but she was held back. She did manage, however, to obtain a position from which she could see what transpired next. Her amazement was no greater than that of the other onlookers when she beheld Atlin, livid with rage, swing at the dancing Frenchman, and saw the latter dodge, then with an extraordinary display of agility lift his foot and kick his assailant! In the chest! Marcel turned his body, bent forward swiftly, and at the same instant lashed out with his leg. It was a maneuver as unexpected by Atlin as by the others. The teamster uttered a loud grunt and reeled backward.

He recovered himself, but not with sufficient quickness. Marcel with the grace of a dancing master and the swiftness of an acrobat followed, bent himself double for a second time and, to all appearances, disjointed himself at the pelvis. Again he hurled his foot at his antagonist with the force of a flail. This time he kicked Atlin under

the right arm and a hollow sound issued from the latter's lungs. Next Marcel shifted to his other foot and kicked Atlin in the left armpit.

The larger man was dazed, enraged at this indignity, but there was no breath left in him with which to voice his opinion of this outrageous and unfair method of assault and battery. He rocked upon his feet; he lunged about; he swung heavily and tried to grapple with his adversary, and meanwhile Marcel kicked him first on one side, then on the other; on the ribs, on the head, in the stomach. He dropped the big fellow, finally. Atlin fell with a crash and crawled under his bunk. He was in great pain and bewilderment; the universe was spinning dizzily about his head.

Marcel stooped and peered under the bunk at his victim. He was breathing heavily from his exertions as he exclaimed:

"Ho! Me, I chase pipple in gopher-house, too. I don' savvy the American box no more as you savvy *la savate.* That's French way of boxin'. How you like 'em? I kick hole in board fence wit' my sockfeet, jus' like you. You're cave-man, eh? Me, too—only I don' know it biffore." He straightened himself, filled his chest, and glared belligerently about at his spellbound audience. "Well, anybody goin' mak' fun on Marcel?" He

scowled terribly and tugged at his mustache. "*Eh bien!* Get out the way. Mak' passage for Marcel Labaudie."

Flora was no longer in the crowd. She had fled back to her tent and was trembling there in mingled expectancy and dread. It was perhaps twenty minutes before she heard quick, purposeful footsteps approaching and recognized them as Marcel's. He did not knock nor ask if he might enter; he flung the door wide and strode through it.

Fiercely he stared at the cowering beauty; then he announced harshly: "I have lick this so big Atlin. I have kick him off his dam' block. Then I have gone to Colonel Waldo an' t'row up my job. I am valet no longer. No. I am workin' in the store wit' your papa. M'sieu' le colonel has apologize' for the insult I have endure at the fingers of his frien's. My honor is satisfy. But you—! *You*—!" The burning intensity of the speaker's gaze became almost intolerable. "Well? You goin' to marry me nice, or mus' I pull off your hair?"

"Marcel!" quavered the girl. Tears came into her blue eyes, she wrung her strong, capable hands. "I never liked Atlin. Honest, I never—"

"Humph! We see 'bout that. 'The puddin' is proof against eatin'.' Now mebbe you give me

nice kiss." With these words the speaker seized Miss Dahlgren savagely.

"*Marcel!*" she cried again. "You—you're hurting me!" There was a moment of silence, then, "You great, big, splendid—*brute!*"

Cool Waters

THE valley was as dry as powder and as hot as the top of a stove. It lay between barren hills, the naked summits of which were blackened, doubtless by volcanic fires, although one could easily imagine that the ceaseless rays of the vertical sun had burned them brittle. The sandy plain separating the two ranges was covered with desert vegetation—queer misshapen growths, most of which were blunt and limbless. Some of the trees were mere stubs, others were shaped like gallows, still others bore clumsy limbs of a sort and a sparse covering of tiny leaves out of all proportion to the size of the trunks against which they clung.

There were cacti of many varieties, of course, huge ribbed ones forty feet tall that resembled tremendous candelabra, others that were smaller and more grotesque in shape with hundreds of fleshy upright ears or with melon-like knobs and protuberances upon their extremities. An occasional shrub or clump of bushes upthrust itself between the larger trees, but every growing thing was somehow distorted; all were twisted by the heat, or bent by discouragement, perhaps; likewise every growing thing, from the tiny cucumber cactus, half buried in the sand, up to the tallest gallows tree,

was covered with spikes and spines, with dagger points and talons. All these thorns were poisonous, all made festering wounds when flesh came in contact with them. Virus tipped their points.

It was in truth a place of many poisons, a valley of pain, for what discomfort the cat-claws and the dagger points failed to inflict, the blistering sun and the irritating dust accomplished.

At night when the weedless, grassless surface of the earth had flung off most of the heat stored up during the day, it was possible to breathe without gasping and to move about without streaming sweat; but this relief was short and it merely served to intensify the suffering that came with the ardent rays of the morning sun. The days were hideously long.

It was not a fit dwelling place for man, and why nature had gone to such lengths of devilish ingenuity in devising means to discourage him was hard to understand. Gloria Fisk often asked herself that question. Probably it was because of the oil, she decided. Oil was precious; the getting of it always entailed hardship and suffering. It seemed to her, however, that Nature had outdone herself here; that she had been more cruel than necessary. She could have economized on at least half of her discomforts and still have left the place a Gehenna. The heat and the glare alone

were intolerable; why add the dust and the drought and the poisons and the maddening isolation? Why pour out all her hatred upon this place?

Other oil fields were not utterly impossible to live in—the coastal fields, for instance, were bad enough, but they were infinitely more livable than this. One could endure damp heat or tropic fevers and stinging insects—even the depredations of bandits—more easily than this eternal, dry, blood-thinning heat. Bandits, however bloodthirsty, were better than dust day and night, dust borne on every breeze, dust kicked up by hoofs and wagon wheels and truck tires, dust that got into one's food, one's clothing, one's eyes and ears and lungs; ever-present dust from which there was no escape. Insects, fevers—almost anything was better than the maddening monotony of these rainless days during which nothing, absolutely nothing, happened to divert one's thoughts from one's misery.

There were still other oil countries, of course, where one could live in actual comfort, where one could meet white people and speak English and hear running water and see green grass—

Green grass! Cool waters!

Mrs. Fisk with a languid sigh went to the open window, parted the dusty curtains, and peered out. The glare was blinding, heat waves caused the distant derricks to dance and to waver. There was

a dryness in the air that caused her throat to contract so that it seemed to rustle when she swallowed. It was a wretched street—a roadway, almost incandescent at this hour of the day—and it ran through a sprawling village of flimsy, unpainted houses all hastily slapped together out of boards and corrugated iron hauled in from the coast by rail. Sun like this demanded thick 'dobe walls, of course, but there was neither clay here at El Centro nor water with which to mix it. No, the water, too, came by rail in hot steel tank cars, most of which were foul.

Not a yard, not a fence, not a vine, not a bush, not a patch of green met Mrs. Fisk's weary eyes—nothing but the melancholy buildings, the road ankle-deep in a choking gray powder that coated roofs and walls and even the scattering desert vegetation round about the town itself.

Where the road came into view over a low knoll, there appeared a rolling cloud created by the wheels of an approaching car. Roads around El Centro were so rough that seldom could a car beat the dust unless favored by a breeze; it must perforce rock and jolt slowly through a suffocating smother that coated a driver's lungs as thickly as his skin. Like a trail of smoke ignited by some invisible brand, this dust streamer wound closer until

Gloria made out her husband at the wheel of his rattle-trap flivver.

All cars were rattle-traps six weeks after they were put over these roads; this one complained loudly, its limber fenders clashed, a jet of vapor rose from its radiator cap. Its tonneau was piled full of rope and tackle. All automobiles at El Centro carried similar cargoes. Veering drunkenly around the corner of the house, it coughed once or twice as if clearing its one lung, then with a long-drawn sigh of escaping steam it came to rest.

"Hello, honey!" Donald Fisk smeared the sweat and the dust from his face and kissed his wife. He was a robust young giant, but the desert had tried the fat out of his frame and left it spare. His skin was burned almost black, and when he grinned his teeth gleamed forth as white as dominoes. Like the other men of El Centro, he smelled always of perspiration.

"My, but you're dirty!" Gloria told him. "You look too funny—" She laughed outright at the expression lent by the muddy streaks of sweat.

"You're feeling better, aren't you?" he demanded, quickly. "Jove, Gloria! That's the first time you've laughed in ages."

"I'm feeling wonderful! I'm *well!*"

"Seems like a month at least since you laughed. What is it?"

"Come! I'll show you." Playfully Gloria took the thumb of his right hand in her fingers and led him across the floor. She fairly danced ahead of him to the door of the bedroom, where she bade him look. "There! I've been bubbling ever since I heard about our reservation."

Donald peered into the chamber; what he saw was an open steamer trunk and a half-filled suitcase upon the bed. The room itself was strewn with articles of clothing. "Why, *kid!* You've begun to pack!" Gloria nodded. "Good Lord! And it's ten days yet before we go!"

"I know—but I couldn't wait. Oh, Don, you don't *know* how I hate this place! You just haven't the faintest conception how I absolutely *hate* it." Mrs. Fisk was still laughing, but there was an hysterical catch in her voice. "That's all that ails me—this desert! Now I'm going home. I'm going home—I'm going home!" She sang the words and her eyes sparkled.

"Well, you're not going to take all that trash when you go. Not if I can help it," her husband declared; but she interrupted his vigorous protest by saying:

"Maybe not, but it's such fun to get ready—and I haven't anything else to pack. I can't sit still and merely *wait!* I've packed and unpacked a half dozen times. When I get it all in, I pre-

tend I've forgotten something important and there's barely time to throw it out and repack. Oh, Don, little shivers and tickles run over me every time I think of it! Home! I'm going to pack every day. That telegram about the stateroom has done more to cure me than—than anything. I *am* well! Don't you think I am?" Gloria's voice quavered, broke; her face was briefly contorted and tears appeared upon her lashes.

"Sure, you're well. Just played out with the heat and the confounded monotony, that's all. Wait till you begin to breathe the good salt air."

"And our stateroom is on the shady side of the ship!"

"I made sure of that. What's more, those fruiters pump cool air into the cabins. Oh, it won't take you long to pick up! I want you to have your old pep and your old color back when we land. You've got to have it or—well, the family will make it deuced unpleasant for me." A furrow appeared between Fisk's dusty brows. He stared about the sparsely furnished rooms, then he said, earnestly: "You've been a game kid to put up with this. It was worse than I expected; yes, worse than your people said it would be. If I'd realized just what it was like here, I'd never have brought you. But say"—his face lightened again—"won't it be great to put it over them?"

Gloria nodded. Her brief enthusiasm had left her limp, so she sat down on the edge of the bed. She managed to summon enough animation to agree. "Yes. They were so smart—they knew it all, didn't they? It will be nice to crow."

"Mighty nice for me, anyhow. You just go ahead playing at packing and unpacking your clothes, but when we leave we'll throw 'em all away. I'll buy you new ones—the most expensive ones on Fifth Avenue. I'll buy you more than you ever had—twice as many as your dad gave you! Yes, and we'll drive out the Island in our own limousine. I'll get you a couple of 'em."

"It will be too late for the peonies when we get there," Gloria said, musingly, "but the roses will be coming in. The ramblers on our place are wonderful. Think of it, Don, roses, green grass, running water! That brook and the trout pond! Won't it seem *heavenly* to be cool and clean again? I'm going to roll in the grass and bury my face in it."

"Same here! And the first time it rains I'm going to stand out and take every drop of it. It seems to me that every last pore in my body is thirsty."

"How is the new driller getting along?" Mrs. Fisk inquired.

"McKay? Oh, fine! All I'm afraid of is that

he may work too fast. These hustlers are apt to be careless, you know. He's at twenty-six hundred and fifty—right on top of the structure. We'll be ready to shoot day after to-morrow. I've ordered the nitro and it will be out to-morrow. Believe me, I'm not going to lose a minute."

"If it comes in big—" Gloria began.

"It will. That well is going to live up to its name, 'Homestake Number One.'" Fisk made the assertion positively. "It's bound to be a five-thousand-barrel well—or better. Can't help it, in that location."

"I wish I had your confidence," his wife said, doubtfully. "I guess I'm too tired to be enthusiastic any more. I meant to ask if it will mean delay. Will you have to stay and see to it?"

"No, no! Everything's arranged. Once I bring it in, Nolan can take charge."

"I'd *die* if we missed that boat. The well should have been in a month ago, but"—Gloria sighed—"something always seems to go wrong in this business. Just at the last moment. Disappointment, heart-break—oh, I *hate* it! *Hate* it! I'm so nervous I could scream—"

"She's just a tired, sick little kid." Fisk spoke comfortingly and stroked his wife's hair with a mother's touch. "This horrid old desert has worn her out, but it's going to make her well and happy

and—rich. We've made a hard fight, honey, but it's nearly over. A little more courage, a little more patience!"

Gloria regained control of herself with an effort and her flower-like face broke into a smile. "I'll be patient. Only don't let anything happen."

As he left the house, Donald told himself with a pang that he had a sick girl on his hands. Gloria was sicker than she had permitted him to realize and it had taken this brief flicker of animation at the prospect of going home to show him just how weak she really was. She was fragile, bloodless, the life and the laughter had gone out of her. As a matter of fact, he had watched it go day by day for months and he had tried vainly to check it, but never before had he appreciated to what extent she had failed. If anything should happen to her —Don closed his eyes and refused to face such a thought. Only ten days more, then they would go north to those green fields and cool waters of which she was forever wistfully speaking. Ten days wasn't long.

This certainly was not a woman's country. Least of all was it a country for a lovely, high-bred creature like Gloria. But, Don reflected, it had been this or nothing. Gloria had been willing, nay eager, to marry him, even against her family's advice, and even though it had meant exile.

Nor had she once complained, at least not until today when it was all over and she could voice her hatred of this life without hurting him. That was like her, to fade away, if need be to die by inches at his side, without complaint.

One thing was sure—without Gloria's love to strengthen him he would never have had the courage and the pertinacity to win his fight against the desert. The mere fact that his own money and that of his friends was sunk in the El Centro field would not have been sufficient to keep him here. Not by any means. He would have thrown up the undertaking long ago. But with a wife like Gloria, a man couldn't quit; he couldn't tolerate failure of any sort.

If he and Gloria had been able to get away once in a while it would not have been so bad, but money from the wells which he had somehow managed to drill had gone into new equipment, into storage tanks, tank cars, drilling rigs, leases, and the like; for in order to live at all in this business it had been necessary to expand, and as a result production had not quite kept pace with expenditures. It had been the old, heart-breaking story of most so-called successful oil enterprises—just enough encouragement to render it impossible to let go. But the company had real holdings now, and with the Homestake making five thousand bar-

rels a day, yes, or even one-half that, it would be out of the red in no time and its stock would be worth a lot. It would be worth so much that Gloria could well afford to give her family the laugh. Something like a million dollars, that's what it would mean to them. And Homestake couldn't miss. El Centro wasn't that kind of a pool. Once inside the limits, a man was as safe as if his money were in the Bank of England.

Ten days more, then New York with its shops and its lights and its theaters. He'd show Gloria that he wasn't merely a machine eternally thinking, talking, dreaming, living oil. He'd prove that he was the wildest, the most extravagant, the most devoted lover the world had ever seen. The things he would buy for her—the love, the tenderness he'd shower upon her! He'd repay her for the faith and for the courage she had shown. Ten days more!

Gloria ate but little supper that night. She attributed her lack of appetite to excitement, to the anticipation of leaving, but as a matter of truth, Francesca, the one servant they could afford, had been more than usually shiftless that afternoon and the young wife herself had been forced to prepare the meal. Any exertion of late left her upon the ragged edge of utter collapse.

Donald's sympathetic remonstrance was inter-

rupted by old Pedro, the water man. Pedro halted his groaning truck outside the house and called something in Spanish that took Fisk away from the table and out into the road. Gloria had mastered only a few words of the language—this climate robbed women of energy both physical and mental—hence she could not understand what was being said. When Don returned, he forestalled her anxious query by announcing:

"McKay's in some sort of trouble and I've got to run out there again. Don't worry—it's nothing much."

"What kind of trouble?" Gloria's tired face was suddenly drawn with apprehension.

"Some kind of a fishing job—Pedro didn't know just what." Fisk came around the table and kissed his wife. "Don't fret, and don't wait up for me. You know how long everything takes around a well. I may not get it fixed before morning." He smiled reassuringly and playfully pinched her ear. "Can't afford to risk any delay for the sake of a little sleep, eh?"

With sinking heart Gloria watched him go, for there had been something in his voice that belied his cheerful words. This hateful oil business! Its hazards were never ending; there was a malignant genius in the wells that took delight in wrecking

human plans and killing high hopes, however well founded.

Don returned for breakfast, hot and tired and dirty; he began gruffly: "I was afraid of McKay! He dropped a tool in the hole."

"What does that mean?"

"He didn't set up his joint properly, I presume. Anyhow, it means we've got to fish it out."

"Is that a—a long job?"

"Not necessarily; depends on how the stem is cocked, and things like that. We're going to take a picture of it—you know, lower a soap mold and take an impression. While they're doing that I'm going to get a few hours' sleep—I haven't been off my feet all night. Lord, it's hot!"

Fisk lay on his bed all that morning, and he perspired in his sleep. Meanwhile his wife went on with her packing and her unpacking. There was indeed very little to get ready and it was a foolish waste of effort, but she had to do something with her hands and this occupation gave her the same pleasure she had derived from folding and unfolding her doll's clothes for imaginary journeys. She had loved to play that game when she was a tiny girl and she was becoming very childish of late.

Don left again during the most cruel heat of the afternoon; he returned about midnight and Gloria gathered from what he told her that these fishing

jobs were tedious at best and that the crew was getting along as well as could be expected.

For two days his nightly report was the same. Had the accident occurred earlier, he would have proceeded, upon failure to grapple the troublesome bit stem, to sidetrack the obstruction, so he explained. In other words he would have drilled past it by allowing the second bit to be deflected by the first. The lost tool was in reality a forty-foot steel shaft standing in the bottom of the hole, and it weighed many hundreds of pounds. Inasmuch as it was tipped so that its upper end rested against the side of the well, it was not easy to get hold of. This new drilling would have resulted in a crooked hole fifty or sixty feet deep and would have left the obstructing tool standing upon a shelf of rock. By exploding a small shot a few feet below this shelf the lost bit could have been dropped into the pocket—sidetracked—after which the old shaft could have been carried on.

But Fisk declared he was afraid to attempt this maneuver so close to the structure. Other oil men had warned him against doing so. Twice something of the sort had been tried in the El Centro field and in each instance a ruined well had resulted. The shots had seared the rock—due perhaps to some peculiar characteristic of the formation. Again he told his wife not to worry; some

new fishing tools were on the way up from the coast; McKay might have the obstruction out before they arrived—in fact, he might get hold of that bit stem at any moment. That was the way with fishing jobs.

Don maintained this hopeful attitude; in his wife's presence he continued to be cheery, but out at the Homestake, where he spent twenty out of every twenty-four hours, he was anything but optimistic. Nor was he a pleasant person to get along with. Under ordinary circumstances he would have refused to be unduly perturbed by the accident, for delays are an inevitable part of the oil game and grappling blindly for a bit stem in the bottom of a steel-lined shaft a quarter of a mile deep is slow work at best. Sometimes it takes weeks.

But circumstances were not ordinary. Gloria's heart was set on catching that boat, the days were slipping past, and Don could no longer blind himself to the truth that she was seriously ill and ought to go. And yet there was nobody here he could send with her, nor could he leave until the well was in. The directors wouldn't stand for that, even if he could bring himself to do such a thing. It so happened—as it usually does happen—that no time in the entire history of the company's operations could have been more unpropitious than the pres-

ent for a mishap such as this. The treasury was low, there were bank loans soon to be met; nothing less than big new "production" could avert a serious crisis. If he lost the Homestake, the company was wrecked.

Fisk drove his men without mercy, but it was maddeningly futile work, this blind grappling, this interminable experimenting with one device after another. He became irritable and jumpy; his hands shook when he wiped the stinging sweat out of his eyes; he cursed the desert aloud when its heat rendered the work doubly hard. Working on that derrick floor was like working upon a bed of coals. Every piece of metal that flesh fell upon was hot enough to blister; the stale water that he and his men swilled down their throats was tepid, and even in their sleep they were thirsty.

Fisk told his wife grimly one day that they could not make the boat. She took the announcement much as she would have taken a blow in the face. It left her pallid and stricken with something infinitely worse than pain. She crept away, and a few minutes later he found her weeping. She made no sound, there was no expression of grief upon her face, but tears of utter exhaustion were coursing down her cheeks.

"Honey! Honey girl!" her husband cried in agony. "Don't take it like that!"

She tried to smile. "I'm so tired, Don! I've been planning so. Oh, Don, I haven't strength left to stand another disappointment!"

"We'll catch the next boat, sure."

"I've been thinking so much about the green grass and the cool waters! I'm so hot—so tired!"

Fisk nodded; his face was working. "I know. But I can't leave. I *can't*—without throwing away everything we've fought for. The company will go to smash—you understand! I'd chuck it all if it were mine, but the crowd relies on me. They'd never forgive me. I'd be a quitter!"

"I suppose so." Gloria tried unsuccessfully to check the tears. "My people, too! We wouldn't have our triumph, would we? You mustn't mind me. I'm such a baby! I'll be all right as soon as I get home."

Day after day the work at the well went on; day after day there was some new device, some fresh invention to try. More than once Fisk was tempted to risk everything by exploding a charge of nitroglycerine that would shatter the obstruction and then attempt to drill through the mass of broken metal. But other oil men warned him that he was crazy to think of such a thing. He might better pull his casing and start a new hole.

He began to wonder if he were not indeed going crazy, for at times he was tempted, oh, so sorely

tempted, to snatch up his pale little girl wife and fly with her, leaving the company to salvage what it could from the wreckage. Only by the strongest effort of will did he resist this insane temptation.

When he canceled their second reservation Gloria went to bed. There seemed to be nothing seriously wrong with her and in fact there was nothing the matter—except a broken heart. Racehorses are like that—they will run until their hearts break, until there is not another gallop in them; and Gloria was from thoroughbred stock. The desert had beaten her.

A few days later Fisk wired to the port for the best doctor available, and the latter came up on a special locomotive. What the doctor said drove out of the husband's mind all thoughts of oil, of fishing jobs, of Homestake Number One. A nurse was secured as quickly as possible and meantime the physician stayed on.

Fisk did not return to the well; he hung about the house, a dumb figure of suspense. Gloria no longer knew him and that was terrifying. He was like a frightened child, deserted and alone. Every whisper that issued from her lips was like a knife-thrust. He did not sleep; his eyes grew bloodshot from the tears that came whenever he left the sick room.

The doctor and the nurse watched him covertly

and more than once they found him muttering words as senseless as those that fell from the sick wife's lips. He wildly cursed himself and the desert.

Over and over, in his saner moments, Fisk told himself that this was all a hideous nightmare from which he would awaken. It *must* be a dream. His mind could not envisage a tragic culmination to his long and bitter struggle—his and Gloria's struggle. There is, there must be, a law of compensation; things come out right in the end and the innocent do not suffer. God wouldn't punish Gloria for his sin. That was inconceivable.

Nature finally exacted toll for the way he had cheated her, and although he ached intolerably for sleep, he arrived at a condition where he could not close his eyes; when he lay down his brain began to race and black fancies drove him sighing out of his bed.

One morning when the brazen sun rose over the hills and began again to pour its hatred into the valley, the doctor told him as gently as possible that the end was near and that he must prepare himself. It was merely a question of time now, a question of hours, when the tired heart would cease to function. Gloria was in no pain; further stimulants were useless, they would merely serve to hasten that inevitable moment when the weight of

her lungs would prove too heavy for her feeble breath to lift.

Donald groaned. If only she would revive enough to recognize him, to give him one word, one look! He would know then that she forgave him. But for her to slip away without even a smile, a kiss—God, no! It was not she who was ill, dying; it was he.

"It isn't a case where any sort of medicine can do much good," the doctor explained. "I've had other cases like it. Nothing organically wrong, but—you understand! It's the country, I guess. The heat or the monotony or—hope deferred, maybe. We have a lot of it down here. If your well had come in, I'm sure she'd have rallied." He said something more, about his other patients; about the next morning's train; about a chance to ride down on one of the tank cars—but Fisk did not hear him.

The husband sat most of that day in a trance waiting for his hideous dream to end. Sometimes he bowed his head in his hands, but the other watchers could not tell whether it was tears or sweat that ran down between his fingers. They fancied it must be the latter, however, for his grief was too abysmal for tears and in his eyes there appeared to be no comprehension of what was going on.

Late in the afternoon Fisk heard the little brown Goya children playing in the road. They were laughing! He groaned aloud. Children! Gloria and he had wanted children, but there again the desert had thwarted them. This was no country for white women. A man might as well lock his wife in a furnace and expect her to bear children.

So Gloria was dying! And he had killed her! He rose and creaked about the house, wringing his hands. His mental numbness was wearing off now and agony consumed him. His mind was galloping, running away, and he talked incessantly, but with a thick tongue and without finishing his sentences. Yes. He had killed her! He had staked her out on the blistering desert as the Apaches staked out their prisoners, leaving the sun to wreak its torture.

What was that the doctor had said? If Homestake had come in she would have lived? Oh, there were devils in this valley! They were in the air, in the dagger points that armed the cacti and the blood-bushes. Yes, and other demons were in the rocks beneath the hills. These latter were the worst, for they collected in the bottom of oil wells and cut cables; they deflected fishing tools; they filled threads and sockets with mud and grit. Malignant devils! The Homestake was full of them.

An insane determination took slow hold of Fisk.

He went out and cranked up his flivver, mumbling to the nurse that it was necessary for him to go out and look after the job. Company affairs, he told her, wildly, had to proceed, even if girl wives died and their husbands went crazy with grief. Companies were like that—soulless and unfeeling—just like devils—great joke on company managers, wasn't it? They put in their lives, they sweated their souls white, and got—*this*. Damn all companies!

The car shot away and went rocking, pitching down the road.

McKay and his men were asleep when their employer arrived; he did not awaken them. The desert moon was bright enough to read by, so he flung himself out of the car and picked his way to the shanty where the nitroglycerine was stored. The explosive was just as he had left it three weeks before; he carried it out into the light and poured it into the long tin containers designed for lowering into the well. He worked swiftly and with no more caution than if he were handling so much lubricating oil. The torpedoes, when filled, he carried in upon the derrick floor; then he ran a thin manila line through a block, and the end of this he made fast to the first cartridge.

So! Those little devils would drop his tools, would they? They'd wreck the well, bankrupt

the company, and make him lose his boat, eh? Murderers, that's what they were. They had murdered Gloria. By Heaven! two could play at that game!

He let the long, shiny torpedo slip quietly into the casing mouth so as not to give them warning of what he had in mind.

McKay and his crew were awakened by a peculiar sensation; it was as if their beds had been lifted a few inches by the upward thrust of a thickly padded piston and then dropped.

"Hey! Who kicked my bunk?" inquired the driller as he sat up.

A startled voice answered him. "That's funny! Me too. Did you fellows hear anything?"

One man had, another had not. Somebody suggested an earthquake—anything was likely to happen in this accursed country. They were arguing stupidly in the dark when McKay spoke with all trace of sleepiness gone from his voice:

"Hark! . . . My God, *listen!*"

An instant, then he was out upon the floor and the others had followed him. They stood strained, alert. At first the hush of the desert was as complete as that of a tomb; then from somewhere came a long, sighing exhalation, not unlike breath issuing from the lungs of a wounded giant. It was an eery, penetrating sound, close yet far away; it

came from nowhere, from everywhere, and it raised the hair upon the necks of the listeners. Together they tumbled out of the shanty.

There was nothing in sight except the Homestake derrick, a gaunt skeleton silvered by the moon; nevertheless that sigh grew, second by second, and as it continued it changed into a whistling moan, indescribably blood-curdling. The men realized finally that it came from the well. And yet that was impossible! The soil beneath their feet was trembling now; from the casing mouth issued a vibrating rumble, a rasping, gasping, gurgling roar.

Then before their staring eyes an amazing thing took place. Homestake Number one vomited into the night a geyser of black mud and water and broken stone. The burden came with a great retching, as if coughed out from the very vitals of the earth, but oddly enough, instead of diminishing, the jet mounted higher, moment by moment, along with the pitch of the sound that came with it. It sprayed up, up, climbing the eighty-foot derrick section by section, until the crown block was hidden. It stood there finally, a tremendous fountain belching its rage up towards the empty sky. There was the rush of many waters; the desert was drowned beneath a deluge; there came a raw, penetrating odor of gas and petroleum.

Homestake Number One had come in.

The valley had flung off its suffocating shroud of heat; for a few hours at least there was respite. In the living room of the Fisk home the doctor and the nurse were talking quietly, soberly; occasionally they stopped and listened, for out of the night came a monotonous note like the hoarse blast of a siren many miles away. Finally through this irritating monotone came another sound, the approaching rattle of a rickety automobile. The road was illuminated by the glare of headlights, then in the open doorway there appeared the figure of a man in dripping, oil-soaked garments which the dust of the road had rendered indescribably foul. His hair was matted, his face was smeared, his shoes were sodden, and when he stepped they oozed a sticky liquid the color of tar. He had, it seemed, been plunged into a lake of oil, then rolled in dirt, for he reeked with the smell of crude petroleum.

It was Donald Fisk. He stood rocking upon the threshold; the whites of his eyes glared wildly as he fixed his gaze upon the bedroom door; he tried to voice a question, but the dust was thick in his throat and he failed.

The doctor approached him, laid a hand upon his greasy sleeve, and spoke in a low tone: "She is—asleep!"

Fisk flung off the grasp, lifted his arms on high

and uttered a cry of despair. "Gloria! *Gloria*—" He clenched his grimy fists and shook them, he began to curse in a hoarse, horrible, croaking voice.

"Hush!" The doctor seized him again, struggled with him. "Man! You don't understand. She's asleep! She's better!"

Fisk comprehended nothing at first except the sharp admonition for silence; that was all his brain could compass.

"The change came an hour ago. She has a chance. Heaven only knows what happened—"

There was a breathless pause while Donald Fisk slowly groped his way up out of utter blackness. In the silence could be heard that same faint monotone. It sounded like the distress signal of some distant liner, the whistle rope of which had been tied down.

"It was a miracle, Mr. Fisk!" the nurse piously asserted. "Strength came to her out of nowhere. She began to breathe more easily, her heart grew stronger—"

"It was the well! She was waiting—waiting. It came in an hour ago! Don't you hear it?"

"Quiet! Not so loud."

But the husband was deaf to caution. "Her soul was waiting, hovering—she wouldn't leave me as long as there was hope—" A convulsion racked the oil-soaked figure. "Homestake came in like

a lion, like a thousand lions, roaring, belching—" His voice broke, he choked. "It's the biggest well in the country! Twenty thousand barrels a day or more. My head's splitting from the noise. It drowned me—deafened me! When I saw it was oil I—I cursed God!" The speaker turned, lurched blindly to the wall, and, resting his head in his hands, began to sob like a little boy. "I stood there with my face to the sky and cursed God!"

Towards morning Gloria stirred, opened her eyes, listened, then smiled contentedly at her husband. He had to bow his head close to catch her whispered words: "Our boat! I was so tired! I thought I couldn't wait any longer. Then—I heard it coming in—our ship!"

"Yes, dear." He pressed his hungry lips to her cheek. "You waited, and our ship came in."

The Michigan Kid

CONDITIONS were just right for snowballing. The weather had turned warm during the night and morning found the snow wet enough to pack well. By the time Jimmy Rowan arrived at the school grounds he was glowing, panting. He had "washed" the faces of several girls, to an accompaniment of shrill protests and panicky shrieks, and some of the older boys had run him down, cornered him, and washed his face until his cheeks shone like a ripe tomato. His mittens were wet; there was snow down his neck and inside his stockings; his muscles ached, for he had launched a hundred missiles and dodged a thousand. Gee! it was fine!

A real battle was in progress in front of the school yard. On opposite sides of the street rival forces were drawn up; sallies and counter-sallies, charges and flank attacks, were going on amid a pandemonium of shouts and warwhoops. Into the fray Jimmy dashed. Delirium seized him.

The Rowan kid was a stocky youngster and he could throw a snowball with what seemed to him a destructive, nay a deadly force, but, alas! he was wild! Every time he threw he grunted, and fre-

quently he fell down—heavy guns have a terrible recoil—but thus far he had scored no hits.

Just as things were at their hottest there sounded the musical jingle of sleigh bells and into School Street turned a team of high-stepping bays hitched to a cutter. It was the Morris rig, and Mr. Hiram Morris himself was driving. He wore his high, shiny silk hat and his beaver gauntlet driving gloves and the overcoat with the beaver collar. The Morris buffalo robe hung down over the swelling sides of the cutter. The clamor abated; hostilities were suspended to let him pass between the battle lines, for Mr. Hiram Morris was Dover's leading citizen and when he appeared everything in town ceased, fell out of step. Dover stood in awe of Hiram Morris and it was proud of his turnout, which represented the last word in style and luxury.

On came the equipage; snow flew from the horses' hoofs, their tails and their manes were streaming; Mr. Morris's hands were wrapped in the taut lines and his thin, angular face was set straight ahead.

Now the Rowan kid took his fighting seriously. Fighting, even in make-believe, was something that could be taken on at a moment's notice, but, once begun, it was a sort of sacred ritual that had to be carried out to the very end. He was like a

snake's tail in that he never quit until sundown, and what is more, certain of his normal faculties went into eclipse when he engaged in combat—caution fled; he became possessed of a superlative audacity. The frenzy of battle was on him now. He had "pegged" snowballs at perfect strangers on the way to school and perfect strangers had pegged them back at him. With the exception of that band of heroes at his back the whole world was in arms against him.

His eyes fixed themselves hypnotically upon the majestic spectacle sweeping towards him; mechanically he groped for a handful of snow. His fingers clutched something round and hard; joy of joys, it was spent ammunition of some earlier fray! A snowball turned to ice! Jimmy let fly with all his might from the very outer edge of the sidewalk. He had no faintest expectation of hitting Mr. Hiram Morris; it was merely the high ambition to accomplish bigger and better things. But it was his luck that out of all the missiles he had hurled that morning this particular one should speed to its mark with the unerring accuracy of a rifle bullet.

Mr. Morris's head was actually knocked out from under his "stovepipe" hat. He uttered a cry of mingled pain, profanity, and astonishment, then loudly he shouted:

"*Whoa!*"

He jerked his horses back upon their haunches; his face was convulsed; blood was streaming from his cheek, for that frozen snowball had a stone in it. Swiftly the great man stepped out of the cutter and strode towards his petrified and horror-stricken assailant. There was a scurrying of boys at Jimmy's back. The heroes fled, leaving him alone. Awfully alone.

"Young man!" It was the first time in his eleven long years of life that the Rowan kid had ever been addressed by such a dreadful title. "What is your name?"

"James Rowan." This information was voiced in a thin and feeble soprano. Jim had never realized what an enormous man Mr. Hiram Morris was. He was taller than a church steeple and that blood on his face rendered him incredibly horrid to look at.

" 'James Rowan', eh? Jim Rowan's boy, I presume. Well, young man, come with me." Mr. Morris inserted long, thin, icy fingers into Jimmy's collar and strode towards the school building. Jimmy went with him, touching his toes to the sidewalk every few yards.

The school principal fell into a downright panic when Dover's leading citizen entered his office with his face streaming blood, with one eye already swelled half shut, and with the Rowan urchin

dangling from his hand. Hiram Morris, of all men! Here was catastrophe.

Mr. Morris deposited his wretched burden, then in answer to the principal's bleat of dismay, he snapped:

"'What's happened'? Don't you see what has happened! This young demon tried to—to kill me. What have you got to say for yourself?" Mr. Morris shook Jimmy to drive this question home.

The young demon had very little to say and very little voice with which to say it. He was sorry; he hadn't meant it; he could not explain the satanic impulse which had prompted the outrage; but—all the boys were snowballing. He never thought he could hit Mr. Morris; he never hit anybody he threw at. It was just fun. Jim had become very white and ill; his eyes were swimming in tears.

"My dear Mr. Morris. Oh, my *dear* Mr. Morris!" The principal wrung his hands, cracked his knuckles. "I'll punish him and I'll send him home—expel him, of course. Why, I tell people that we have only little ladies and gentlemen here. It's a reflection upon the institution and upon me. The board will be furious." The speaker chattered along in this vein until Morris interrupted him to say in an altered voice:

"Don't expel the boy."

"Oh, but for the sake of discipline, Mr. Morris!"

"He says he didn't mean to do it. I was furious for a moment, but I've been in snowball fights myself. There's a kind of insanity that tackles kids. I'm not seriously hurt"—the great man was trying to stanch the flow of blood from his cheek with an expensive handkerchief—"and he realizes it wasn't a nice thing to do. Is that right, Jimmy?"

"Y—yes, sir."

"We all make mistakes. Jimmy, I want you to promise to always play fair, after this. Give the other fellow a chance and never hit him when he isn't looking. Will you promise?"

"Y—yes, sir."

"He's frightened nearly to death. I think he has been punished enough." With his blood-stained handkerchief still pressed to his wound Mr. Morris left the principal's room.

This charity of view the principal did not by any means share and the Rowan kid got a licking that he always remembered. This may be a good place, by the way, to state that neither did he forget his promise to Hiram Morris. In the months and years immediately following, the memory of his atrocious act remained fresh; it became a sore spot in his mind which would not heal, and whenever he recalled it he experienced the keenest shame. This had an effect, for it prevented him from get-

ting well acquainted with Rose Morris, his victim's daughter—something he desperately longed to do.

Rose was at once the richest and the prettiest girl in Dover. She drove a sleek, fat little pony hitched to a marvelous wicker dogcart, the envy of every child in town, and to the Rowan kid she represented all that was both desirable and unattainable. By the time he was fifteen he was hopelessly in love with her and he carved hearts and arrows on all the trees in his yard and initialed them with interlocking R's and J's. He wrote her passionate misspelled love notes and in words of fire he told her of his undying devotion. He never sent the notes, of course, and his declarations were only whispered to the empty air, for he still remained "the Rowan kid"; his people were desperately poor and he was cursed with a sensitive pride. He was not only ashamed of his poverty, but also he felt certain that she looked upon him as the would-be assassin of her father, hence in her presence he was stricken dumb.

Jim was surprised one day to hear that Mr. Hiram Morris had "gone out of business" and was leaving for the West. What that meant the boy did not know, but he understood that the Morris fortune was not what it had been. Rose and her mother remained in Dover. They lived on much as usual and they referred vaguely to those large in-

terests which kept Mr. Morris away from home, but the pony and dogcart were gone and so were the high-stepping bays. It was while Jim was working his way through college that they quietly moved away. The Morris house sold for barely enough to pay the mortgage.

Some people endure poverty cheerfully, others with a grim stoicism: the majority of people who are born poor accept it with a fatalistic resignation and never look forward to anything else. Jim Rowan was unlike any of these. He loathed poverty; it was unendurable. It had kept him from knowing Rose Morris, and, now that she was a poor girl, it prevented him from coming to her rescue. He swore he would make himself rich for her sake. In time this became a fixed idea with him and he quit college and went to work, savagely. It took him quite a while, however, to realize that riches are not come by in a hurry and that he was getting nowhere. He had lost track of the Morrises completely—there was no use of keeping in touch with them—but he still had his day-dreams, he still thought of himself as Rose's prince who sooner or later would search her out and seat her upon a throne. Depression seized him occasionally when he saw how hopeless was the task he had set for himself. At such times he grew desperate and he told himself that no price was too great to pay for

success; he longed for some opportunity of becoming suddenly rich and vowed that he would sell his soul for such a chance.

The chance came finally, or it seemed to come, with the news of the Klondike discovery. Jim joined the first rush to the Yukon and he arrived in Dawson City with the firm determination to make a fortune somehow, anyhow. Here again, however, he learned that money was not to be had for the asking.

Placer mining was a hazardous undertaking, with the odds a thousand to one against success. Education counted for little in a country where men were judged on a pick-and-shovel basis and paid for the actual work they did. Jim saw that here was not the place in which to earn a fortune; here was nothing but speculation, chance, a gamble either with men or with nature. In order to beat the game one had to risk all, then double his winnings and risk them again and again. To gamble here was not a sin, it was the daily practice of everybody. Men gambled with death when they hit the trail; they gambled again when they staked their labor and their time against Nature's bedrock secrets, only they took longer chances than when they heaped their chips on the roulette table or dropped their "pokes" on the high card. There was this difference, too; Nature seldom played

fairly, whereas there were many square gambling houses in Dawson.

Jim Rowan fitted himself to his new surroundings and adapted himself to a new code of morals. He played as other men played, except in one respect; he never played for the excitement or for the fun of it, he played only to win. He played for Rose Morris. He tried speculating in claims, but he was unlucky: his only winnings came from the manipulating of Dawson City real estate or at cards, and the time arrived when he found himself the owner of a huge Front Street saloon and gambling house, together with a nickname of the Alaskan flavor. Perhaps a score of people knew him as James Rowan, but to the thousands that went in and out of his place he was "The Michigan Kid." That was the way he even signed his checks, for the name had brought him luck, and superstitiously he clung to it.

Life flowed at a furious pace in those early days. Reputations were made in a night; in six months they were hallowed; in a year they had become legendary. There were many celebrities in the Yukon country the mere mention of whom evoked tales of sensational exploits on the trail, at the mines, or at the gambling tables; the one perhaps best known of all was "The Michigan Kid." He it was who best typified the composure, the steady

nerve, the recklessness of his profession. A hundred stories were told about him, and some were not pleasant, for it required a ruthless man to hold down the job that Jim had taken, but most of them had to do with his luck. That luck became a byword, finally: men blessed with some extraordinary and unexpected good fortune were apt to boast that they had " 'Michigan's' luck." " 'Michigan's' luck" became an Alaskan phrase.

More than once Rowan took stock of his winnings and realized that he had nearly attained the goal he had set for himself, but invariably Fate intervened to prevent him from quite reaching the quitting point. Time crept along. The cycle of life for placer camps is brief. Dawson grew, flourished, began to die; representatives of big companies appeared and bought up tracts of property; they talked of huge dredging and hydraulic projects.

Some of these newcomers were possessed of the gambling fever and they tried their luck against The Michigan Kid's. Rumors spread of big games in the back rooms of the Kid's place, games where the sky was the limit. One man in particular scoffed at " 'Michigan's' luck" and prophesied that he would "get" the Kid—send him out of the country broke. This was a Colonel Johnson, a great engineer and mining promoter who represented a

London syndicate. He and Rowan met, finally, much as famous duellists meet, and behind locked doors they played for twenty hours. What the stakes were nobody knew, but they must have been enormous, and luck must have run the Kid's way, as usual, for Colonel Johnson rose finally, stepped out into the hall, and killed himself.

That at least was the story which was made public and which the authorities accepted. Certain spiteful-minded persons whispered knowingly that this story was all a fabrication: that 'Michigan's' luck had finally deserted him and that the shot had been fired inside, not outside, the room. Ugly rumors such as these flew through the streets, but whether they reached the ears of the Kid nobody ever knew. Perhaps they did. Perhaps that was why he sold his place two weeks later and without so much as saying good by to anybody he caught the next down-river boat.

When Jim Rowan closed the door of his steamer stateroom behind him, he closed it, as he thought, upon The Michigan Kid and everything that had to do with that notorious character. Then when the first bend of the river had hidden Dawson City from view he drew from his pocket a wallet, and from this he carefully extracted a blurry, time-yellowed picture of Rose Morris. It was a picture he had clipped from a Dover newspaper on the day

Rose graduated from the local high school and it showed her as a girl in white with a floppy hat and a sash of ribbon about her waist. It was perhaps the one and only personal possession that he had never risked losing at some time or other. He gazed at it now for quite a while. He wondered if Rose were still alive. If so, she must have grown into a beautiful woman, yes, and a good woman—here the gambler was speaking. No doubt she was married. He pondered this thought deliberately and it awakened a feeling of regret too indefinite to be called a pang, for long ago he had realized that it was not the flesh-and-blood Rose Morris that he worshiped, but an idea and an ideal. Of course he proposed to find her—that was the one thing he had in mind—but what would happen when he had found her was another matter. If she were married and happy and if she remembered the Rowan kid who used to carry milk and drive a dray and do odd jobs around Dover, he might even show her the faded picture and tell her how he had made of her a fetish, a star to guide him along the course of success. He could find a way to tell her that without offense. Any good woman would be pleased to know that her girlish purity, her charm, and her beauty had been a man's inspiration. Of course he wouldn't tell her just how

he had made good. No need of spoiling a beautiful thing.

If, on the other hand, she were not married, and if she did not remember that poor, low-bred Rowan kid too distinctly—well, there again was something to think about!

This latter possibility impelled him to rise and stare at himself in the stateroom mirror. What he saw made him realize one price at least which he had paid for his money. He was still too young to have laid on fat, but his cheeks were soft and pallid. Gone, too, was the animation and the vivacity that lights young faces. His face was a mask—a mask of putty—even the eyes were cold and emotionless. They were the eyes of a man three times his age. It was The Michigan Kid who stared out from that glass and Jim Rowan admitted that he did not like the looks of the fellow.

There were a few people on the river boat who knew him, but when he boarded the steamship at St. Michael he saw no familiar faces, and, inasmuch as his name meant nothing to his fellow passengers, he felt a great relief. Already he had begun to realize, as he had not realized in Dawson, that whatever The Michigan Kid may have stood for on the upper river, back home that name would stand for something altogether different. Back home! The words possess a peculiar significance

for men who have not been "outside" in more than five years. Nobody but the homeward-bound Alaskan can in the least appreciate them.

At Nome the ship hove to for twenty-four hours, and Rowan went ashore to see what the place looked like. Here again he passed unnoticed, and he was greatly cheered by that fact. If he could walk the streets of an Alaskan gold camp without being recognized, it argued that he would have no difficulty whatever in the big world outside.

His attention was attracted by a poster which advertised an informal rally of all the citizens of Nome who hailed from Michigan. The meeting was to be held that night for the purpose of general good-fellowship and acquaintanceship and with the ultimate view of organizing a Wolverine Society. Jim decided to go.

It turned out to be a pleasant gathering. A glad-hand committee was at the door to introduce strangers around; there was a program of entertainment, with refreshments promised afterward. Ice cream and cake! Jim Rowan grinned. Here was old home stuff. He wondered what these pleasant-faced men and women would think if they knew that he, the unobtrusive visitor, was The Michigan Kid, the most notorious "sporting man" in all the north. They would probably ask him to leave. He heard his name mentioned during the

evening—when a judge from Lansing delivered a speech eulogizing the home state and referred to the Kid as "that unsavory character of the upper Yukon who has brought odium upon the fair name of our birthplace." Again Jim grinned. Well, he had the money, anyhow. One has to pay something for success.

Nowhere did he hear a name or see a face that he knew, with perhaps one exception—the face of an old man who sat in a quiet corner. It was a bearded face and the man was poorly dressed. He wore rubber boots and overalls and a faded, threadbare mackinaw that hung loosely from his stooping shoulders. His hair was thin and gray and he coughed a good deal. He appeared to be quite as friendless as Rowan. Jim studied the old fellow's profile and decided that he had probably seen the man across the gambling table or the bar—a river of derelicts like this one had flowed in and out of his place during these recent years. He had about put him out of his mind when the man rose to leave. Then Rowan started, leaned forward; his eyes fixed themselves upon the stranger's bearded cheek. Just under the cheek bone and half hidden in the edge of the beard he saw a scar, and all at once the tall, slouching figure assumed lines and peculiarities he knew. There could be no mistake: it was Hiram Morris, Rose's father.

Jim rose and followed the man out of the building. Hiram Morris here! In Alaska! It was incredible. More incredible still was it to recognize in this bent figure of discouragement the once mighty man of Michigan, the colossus of Jim's youth.

Mr. Morris shuffled along the street, shaking his head and muttering to himself. As he passed the entrance to a bakery whence issued the savory odors of fresh bread, pies, and spicy cakes he paused, lifted his face, and breathed deeply. He halted again before a restaurant inside the show window of which were displayed raw steaks and chops and cold-storage chickens upon a bed of cracked ice.

Jim recognized the expression in that thin, eager face and he experienced a shock. Good God! the man was hungry! Hungry in Alaska! Nobody had ever gone hungry on the Yukon. What kind of camp was this? Jim uttered a whispered oath. He'd damn soon fix this.

Holding his voice to a casual tone, he said: "Excuse me, but I'm looking for a clean café. Can you tell me where the gamblers eat?"

"Right here, I believe. It is the most expensive place in town." The speaker's gaze remained fixed upon the window.

"I'm a stranger here and I don't know a soul. Won't you join me?"

Mr. Morris looked up now, swiftly: in his eyes was a glitter that Rowan had seen in the eyes of famished trail dogs. "Why, you don't know me! Besides—I'm not dressed for a place like this. I thank you, but—"

"Come on. You'll be doing me a favor." Jim held the door open and waited for the ragged figure to precede him, then he selected a table in one of the booths and ordered a meal for two which caused his guest to say:

"My dear sir, you can't be familiar with Nome prices. A T-bone steak is seven dollars and—those fresh vegetables! Why, you've ordered a millionaire's banquet."

"Well, it *is* a sort of banquet with me. It celebrates an occasion."

"Indeed?"

"I met an old friend to-night: a man from my home town. He did a lot for me when I was a kid and this is such a real event that I'd celebrate it if it took my last dollar. Now then, tell me something about this camp."

Mr. Morris was ready and willing to talk about Nome. He had failed greatly and he was at a garrulous age, but about himself he had little to say and it was some time before Jim managed to discover that he had been here for two years, mining, but without success.

"You know how it is," he explained with a tremulous smile; "it takes time to develop a placer property when you have no capital. But I have a splendid claim and one of these days I'll land in the pay."

The two men chatted on until their food was served, and, inasmuch as the host had not seen fit to introduce himself, the guest did not make himself known. It was not until the latter had eaten ravenously, to his complete satisfaction, and had lighted an expensive cigar of Jim's selection, that the younger man said:

"Perhaps you'd like to hear about that old friend I met. He was a big man in our town and I was a poor kid, but he gave me some advice that I've tried to live up to. It came about like this: one morning we were having a snowball fight in front of the school-house when he drove past in his cutter." Mr. Morris peered curiously at the speaker. "I don't know what possessed me, but I threw a ball at him. It was ice. It hit him, hurt him like the devil. I'd have been fired from school only for him. He—"

"Where was this?"

"It was in Dover. You took me to the principal and—"

"Why, this is extraordinary! Then your name is—Rowan. You're Jim Rowan's boy. And you

recognized me, after all these years!" Mr. Morris was deeply moved; his weary face was shining; his eyes had grown bright.

"I couldn't fail to recognize that scar on your cheek, sir, inasmuch as I put it there."

"My dear boy!" The old man took Jim's hand in both of his. "How strange that we should meet like this! And how you fooled me! You had your little joke, didn't you?"

"Merely because I wasn't sure you'd accept my invitation to dine if you knew who I was."

Mr. Morris confessed reluctantly: "I—I'm not sure that I would have accepted, Jim. You see, times have changed; things haven't gone well with me and it hurts a man's pride to acknowledge failure to his friends. I have some pride left. That's why I'm not going back until I land in the pay. Now that you know everything, I'm going to make a confession: I was—actually hungry when you invited me in!"

"Hell of a camp, to let a man go hungry!" Rowan exclaimed, harshly.

"You see, I'm pretty old and I'm not very strong. It's hard for me to get work. However, a little poverty, a little hardship, doesn't hurt anybody. It makes one enjoy good fortune when it comes. But, Jim, my boy, tell me about yourself. How did I ever help you? You must have struck it

rich to be able to afford an extravagance like this —this banquet?"

Rowan shrugged. "I've made a little and I've spent a little. You made me promise to fight fair and never hit a fellow when he wasn't looking. I could have made more if I hadn't lived up to that promise, but—"

"Never mind. Crooked money isn't worth having and money of any sort isn't worth too high a price. This is a cruel country and it's hard to get ahead. But you're young and you've taken good care of yourself." Mr. Morris's failing eyes did not see that Jim's flesh was flabby and that the bleach in his cheeks came from lack of sunlight. "That's your early training. I've no sympathy for these wasters who squander their money over bars and gambling tables."

Rowan nodded gravely; he spoke the literal truth when he said: "Neither have I."

"I'm out of date, perhaps, but I still retain my old-fashioned ideas. I daresay I don't belong here."

"Why don't you leave?"

"How can I?" The question was accompanied by a crooked smile and a regretful shake of the gray head.

"But your family—?" With a gambler's caution Jim was leading up to the question that had

trembled upon his lips from the moment he had first recognized Rose's father.

"Mrs. Morris died several years ago."

"I'm sorry. I haven't heard from home in ages." There was a moment of silence, then with averted eyes and in a tone of indifference the younger man said, "Your daughter Rose must be a woman now."

Hiram Morris looked up eagerly. "Yes. Yes, indeed! A lovely, sweet girl."

"Married, no doubt?"

"No. But some day I hope her Prince Charming will come along. Poor Rose, she deserves a prince! She'd love to see you, I know, but—I'm afraid her pride is stiffer than mine. You understand. She feels our situation keenly—"

"You don't mean she's—*here?*"

"Why, yes! Where else would she be? She's all I have."

Rowan felt himself grow dizzy, ill. Rose here! Dependent upon this poor, feeble old man whom he had surprised staring at a café window like a famished wolf! It was a moment before he could trust himself to inquire: "Where is she? What is she doing?"

"She's out on the creek. I came in to look for a man, a helper, but—I can't pay wages and nobody cares to prospect a claim for an interest in it when there are so many claims to be had for the

staking, or to be jumped. We've about reached the end of our rope. I saw the notice of that Michigan meeting and I thought I might find somebody there."

"You did," said Rowan. When Morris looked at him uncomprehendingly, he explained: "You found me."

"Oh, my boy! You don't understand—"

"I understand perfectly. You want a working partner and you'll give him an interest. All right, how much of an interest do I get?"

"Why, I was going to offer a half—"

"That's too much, just for a pick and shovel stiff. I'll put up the grub and outfit for all hands."

"Nonsense! You've done well—"

"Not well enough so that I can afford to turn down a good offer like this. You've been here two years and you haven't struck pay; I spent five years on the Yukon and never made a dollar out of mining. I left to look for something. Well, I've found it."

The next morning Jim Rowan put a pack on his back and hit the trail. It was the first time in nearly five years that he had felt pack straps, for The Michigan Kid had taken his exercise by proxy, and he was dismayed to discover how soft and how short of breath he had become. He felt a pang

when he heard the siren of his steamer giving the signal to weigh anchor, for he was heartily sick of the northland and hungry for the world outside. He had worked long for this hour; he felt now as if some one had offered him a drink then snatched it away. And the worst of it all was that he had no doubt made a fool of himself! Rose would not—could not be the girl he had known; nor could the faint spark of a boyhood infatuation be fanned into the flame of a real man's love, for men's tastes change without their knowing it. Even if he should learn to care for her and to want her, what then? He knew without asking that Rose shared all of her father's scruples and prejudices. Lucky for him that he had buried The Michigan Kid; he must see to it that grass grew on the grave.

Rose had bloomed into exactly the sort of woman that Jim had expected, thereby disproving the cynical statement that our realizations never equal our anticipations. She was a little more fragile than he had pictured her, but the reason for that was evident and it wrung his heart. Ten minutes after he saw her, heard her voice, looked into her eyes, he had ceased all regrets about that departed steamship.

She was delighted to see the boy she had known, and with her own hands she prepared the simple supper for three. Later she sought out Jim as he

was strolling about the claim, inspecting the traces of old Hiram's desultory and inefficient labors.

"Father tells me that you have bought a complete outfit of supplies, and lumber for another cabin."

"Yes. They'll be out to-morrow."

The girl lowered her eyes and said with some difficulty: "Of course you realize that they came just in time. It's almost easier to take charity from strangers than from old friends. I'm sorry you made the sacrifice."

" 'Charity'? 'Sacrifice'? What sacrifice?"

"Father says you were on your way 'outside'—after five years. I know what that means. Then you met him, heard how badly we were doing, and —came to our rescue. It was a generous impulse, Jim. For all I know it may have taken your last dollar—"

Rowan opened his lips to speak, then closed them.

"You see?" The girl laid her hand upon his arm. "Poor Don Quixote! Won't you think better of it and go out to God's country? You've earned it, Jim, and you'll find your opportunity there. Father is enthusiastic, he really believes in this claim, but I know it's no good, and, besides, we're unlucky. Everything has gone badly since we lost our money back there in Dover. He's a

feeble old man and disappointment has made him almost childish. All he has left is that conviction that some day he'll 'land in the pay.' There are hundreds like him."

"And what would you do?" Rowan inquired.

Wearily Rose shrugged. "What I have always done—remain at his side. I love him. He gave me everything when he had it to give. I'm the staff he leans upon and without me he'd fall. We can get along, Jim."

"How?"

"I was offered a job waiting on table at the Bonanza—"

The man uttered an exclamation. Roughly he said, "I'd sooner see you in a dance hall."

"I could even get married—" Rose smiled faintly.

Jim's hands twitched, but his face was impassive as he said: "No. I'm going to stick. I made a few dollars in Dawson and I left there looking for one more chance—one big chance to win or lose, make or break. I play hunches, and when your father offered to go fifty-fifty with me I had a hunch that my number was due. Have you ever heard of 'Michigan's' luck?"

"Yes, of course. Aladdin's lamp, too, but I never expect to have either."

"Who knows? I have a feeling that your

troubles are over and that your father is really going to land in the pay. Let's hope so, anyhow. I believe in hoping for things until you get them."

It was in this manner that Jim Rowan became a miner, a pick-and-shovel man. He put up a cabin for himself and he did his own cooking—a thing any man abhors. Rose protested that it was quite as easy to cook for three as for two, but Jim could not bear to increase her labors. Although he and Hiram began to prospect the claim, it was he who did most of the actual work. His flabby muscles rebelled, at first; blisters grew upon his white palms; they burst, then turned into callouses. Slowly, painfully he hardened himself. It was an ordeal, but as his body grew strong so did his determination to win the love of Rose Morris. He smiled now at those early doubts of his. It was not alone an ideal that he had worshiped, it was the flesh-and-blood girl, the woman who had become all and more than he had imagined possible.

Every day he had to fight the desire to voice his love, but the better he came to know Rose, the more fearful he became that somehow the grave of The Michigan Kid would be disturbed and that she would behold the skeleton it concealed—grass was slow in growing over it—hence he showed his devotion only in the things he did. He began by building another room upon their cabin, a room

for her, and when she protested against the expense he told her that he was keeping books and that Mr. Morris could pay him back when he "landed in the pay." Thereafter he managed somehow to keep the old man and his daughter in comfort, quite an effort at restraint on his part, inasmuch as he would have welcomed the privilege of supplying them with luxuries and extravagances. Every dollar he spent Rose believed to be his last.

Autumn came and Jim put into effect a plan he had worked out. He "salted" the pannings from their ground just enough to make a showing, this being necessary to his scheme; then he interested a purchaser in buying the claim. He instructed the man to offer twenty thousand dollars for it, supposing, of course, that Mr. Morris would leap at the chance to sell. But this was the first gold the old man had ever found and those few yellow flakes strengthened his senile conviction that the property was rich. He refused the offer. He refused again and again, even when Jim's man raised the bid to forty thousand dollars. He did more than refuse; he boasted about the offer in town and said he had struck regular " 'Michigan's' luck." This caused quite a flurry of excitement and reluctantly Jim was forced to call off his bidder.

His effort had an effect other than he had ex-

pected: a forty-thousand-dollar offer for a wild-cat claim on Friday Creek centered interest there, and promptly the Bonanza crowd sent an outfit over and began work on some property they owned below old Hiram's.

This outfit was in charge of a young fellow by the name of Hayward, and once he had become acquainted with Rose he took such an interest in Friday Creek that he spent all of his time there. This Hayward was a fine-looking, upstanding youth and he undoubtedly had a way with him. But his way with women was more agreeable than his way with men: towards Jim Rowan, for instance, he displayed the same air of contemptuous superiority that he reserved for his employees. Rose liked him, however—perhaps that was the real reason why Jim did not. In any event, the two men were so different in character that a clash was inevitable.

Jim had made it a practice never to go into town for fear of recognition, hence it was Hiram who made the weekly trips for mail and for the necessary purchases. One day while he was in town it began to snow, and during the afternoon this snow turned to rain and sleet. The old man returned about dark, quite wet and chilly. He was a long while getting warmed through and later in the evening he complained of feeling badly and went to bed.

Jim was awakened during the night by a knock on his door. It was Rose. In a tone that instantly brought him to his feet she told him that her father was ill and that she was frightened. Throwing on his clothes, he hurried to the larger cabin. Hiram was burning up with fever; he coughed almost continuously; he was in pain. Jim announced at once that he would go for a doctor.

"I'll send somebody up from the Bonanza camp," he told the girl, "because I won't be able to get back before morning."

Rose turned eyes dark with apprehension upon him. "He's very ill, isn't he? He woke me up muttering. Hear him—? It's all about 'landing in the pay.' "

"I'm afraid he's a pretty sick man. There's a medicine case somewhere among my things. Look until you find it. And don't allow yourself to become panicky. Be a brave girl, Rose." He laid a hand upon Rose's shoulder—it was the first time he had ever touched her except by inadvertence—and there was such sympathy, such comfort in his gesture that tears wet her lashes.

"Oh, Jim!" she cried. "You're a dear. I don't know what I'd do without you."

Young Hayward was in Nome, but Jim got one of the Bonanza men to go to Rose's assistance and also he borrowed a horse for himself. It was not

many miles to town, but it was a wretched night and he was glad when the animal wallowed out of the icy mud and he felt the plank pavements under its feet. The first doctor he found was ill; another had been called to Fort Davis; the third was engaged on a confinement case, but promised to accompany Jim in perhaps two hours. There was nothing to do but wait.

Jim was wet and cold. He stabled his horse, returned to the main street, and entered the first saloon he came to. It was late; there was nobody at the bar, but some of the games were still running and there were a few figures at the lunch counter in the rear. Thither Jim made his way in search of a cup of coffee.

There was a stage at the end of the place where, in the earlier hours of the night, a vaudeville show was given, and at the piano were gathered several weary women of the dance-hall type. One of them saw Jim and spoke to her companions, whereupon they turned and stared curiously at his back.

Young Hayward rose from the faro table and approached the lunch counter. He had been drinking some and losing considerably. There was an unpleasant curl to his lips.

Jim had hitched himself upon one of the high stools; he had raised his mug to drink when Hay-

ward pushed it away from his lips and called to the white-aproned waiter, saying:

"Here! Give this fellow a square meal." At the same time he crashed a twenty-dollar gold piece upon the counter.

"Thanks," said Jim. "I'm not hungry."

"Ham and eggs for a friend of mine," Hayward cried. "And give him the change."

Jim eyed the speaker coldly, as if from behind a mask, but he appeared to take no notice of the tone Hayward had used. Still in an even voice he said:

"Nice of you. I've seen the time I'd take it." He lifted his cup for a second time; again Hayward took his wrist.

"Look here, Rowan. I've been wanting to ask you something. It's about that offer for old-man Morris's claim. D'you know what I think?

"I don't believe you're capable of thinking, right now. If I were you, Hayward, I'd go home and go to bed."

"Is that so?" Hayward's disagreeable smile became more pronounced. "I'll tell you what I think; I think it was phony. I think you tried to put something over—tried to grab something."

"Well? You can't arrest a man for trying."

"I'll tell you something else: old-man Morris is

honest, but I think he's in partners with a damned crook."

The men eyed each other. Very quietly Jim said: "So! You're just spoiling for trouble, aren't you?"

"With you, yes."

"I'm sorry, but I can't oblige you to-night."

"Ha! Nor any other night. I've discovered something else about you, Rowan. You haven't got the guts of a guinea pig." Hayward had not lowered his voice during this colloquy. Those people in the rear of the room had heard most of what he said, and they were looking on now in mingled curiosity and apprehension. The dance-hall girl who had pointed out Jim whispered excitedly to her companions.

"Funny what a fool a man can make of himself," Jim told the young foreman. "Some day you'll realize how badly up against it a fellow can get without knowing it."

"Bah! You *rat!* There's only one way to treat a—" Hayward raised his open hand to slap this object of contempt, but the blow did not descend; he did not finish his sentence, for suddenly his face was deluged by the blinding, scalding contents of Jim's coffee cup. With an exclamation he reeled backward, almost into the arms of the women at the piano. He dashed the liquid from

his face; with his sleeve he wiped his eyes, cleared them; he gathered himself to rush upon the figure still sitting motionless upon the high stool. But one of the girls flung herself upon him, twined her arms about him, and in a voice high-pitched, vibrant with warning, she cried:

"Don't touch him, Hayward! He'll kill you! God, man, that's 'The Michigan Kid.' "

Hayward's struggle died suddenly. It came still-born. Into his purple face crept a look of astonishment, then incredulity.

"What—? I don't believe it!" Manifestly he was still shaken by the urge to destroy, but indecision paralyzed him.

By this time other hands had seized him; he heard the voice of the faro dealer saying: "It's him, all right. Close your trap and beat it."

For a moment the Kid stared silently at the tableau, then he revolved upon his stool until he faced the spellbound waiter across the counter.

"Ham and eggs and a cup of coffee for a friend of Mr. Hayward's!" he said. "Take it out of that twenty and keep the change."

Hayward was propelled towards the front of the house and, although he cursed and glared over his shoulder and mouthed threats as he went, it required no great exercise of strength to speed his going.

Hiram Morris was too sick to be moved. The doctor pronounced it pneumonia and for Rose and Jim there commenced a period of sleepless anxiety. He moved her into his cabin and tried to force her to take some rest, but as for him he did not remove his clothes and scarcely closed his eyes for nearly a week. Then Mr. Morris died. He had muttered almost constantly; the last words they heard him whisper were those of his favorite prophecy, "Some day I'll land in the pay."

That experience forever remained in Jim Rowan's memory as a black, depressing nightmare. To Rose, of course, it was something infinitely worse, vastly more terrifying. During the long hours of uncertainty she had leaned upon him, and in her final grief she put her head upon his shoulder and wept. It gave him the keenest pang of all to be unable to take her in his arms and comfort her.

There followed the customary melancholy preparation and formalities. There were still a few women left on the creeks near by and these did what they could for Rose. Jim tried to induce her to go home with one of them, but this she would not consent to do. She insisted upon remaining until her father had been laid to rest, then willingly enough she promised to leave this place which had been the scene of such pain, such poverty, and such sorrow. It was she who selected a burial place,

upon the north "rim" of the creek—a high bench that paralleled the bottom and that looked out across the tundra towards the open sea. It was a spot that in winter was sheltered from the icy blasts; in summer it was brilliant with wildflowers, lush with tender grasses, and fragrant with blooms —a pleasant place for a gentle, broken old man to sleep. Other hands were ready to dig the grave, but this was a labor that Jim Rowan reserved for his own.

In due time he began it. Fortunately, the rim was well drained and, once he had picked through the thin crust of autumn frost, the gravel was dry and he made good progress. He had finished his melancholy task and was about to climb out of the pit, when he noticed a peculiar reddish tinge to the gravel beneath his feet. He took a heaping shovelful of it and, descending to the creek, he stamped a hole through the ice and idly "panned" it on the shovel blade.

He was engaged thus when young Hayward and two of his men approached. Jim rose and leaned upon his shovel handle. He supposed these were the first arrivals for the funeral, but Hayward explained:

"I came up early to have a word with you, Rowan."

"I thought you said about everything, the other

night," Jim told him. "I'm not in any humor to—"

"Oh, I was drunk! I made a fool of myself. Now that I know who you are, I've come prepared."

Jim stared incredulously at the speaker; harshly he inquired: "You don't mean to say you intend to start something *to-day?*"

"Certainly not. I came up to serve notice on you. I've learned how you met Mr. Morris and came out here, and I understand *why* you came. But Rose doesn't understand. She doesn't know you're The Michigan Kid; she thinks you're just the old friend of the family, her little playmate from the home town. She doesn't know it was you that offered forty thousand dollars for this claim."

"Right. She doesn't know any of those things. I suppose you intend to tell her."

"I do. Unless you have enough decency left to behave like a man."

"How do you figure a man would behave?" Jim asked. "Of course it's all hearsay with you, but I'm curious to know."

Hayward flushed. "Never mind that line of talk. I came to give you a quiet word of warning but if you want to get nasty, why, just write your own ticket. I'm ready to take you on now, or later."

"I see. That's why you brought help."

The speaker's color deepened. "Listen, Rowan! I know what happened to that Englishman, Thompson. He didn't have any friends with him; the witnesses were all *your* friends. I've heard about a lot of your other fights, too—if you can call 'em that—and I've had a dozen warnings to lay off of you, so I provided my own witnesses. Now here's what I've got to say—after the ceremony, you duck!"

"And what will happen to Rose?"

"I'll attend to that. She has friends enough to see her through."

"If I don't duck, I suppose you'll tell her I'm a gambler and that I offered to buy her father's claim for ten times what it's worth. That'll certainly shock her."

"Oh, you had a reason for that offer—more of your ' "Michigan's" luck,' probably! I understand you did most of the panning. Funny about that luck of yours, isn't it? Funny how everybody loses when they play you. You were crooked in Dawson and you couldn't even play straight with Rose and her father. It's perfectly obvious why you came out here in the first place. Hell! Men like you ought to be shot for *looking* at a girl like her!"

"Well, Hayward, I'm not going until I get ready."

"Have it your own way. But take it from me,

your 'luck' has run out." The Bonanza foreman turned and walked down the creek, followed by his two watchful companions.

It was a dismal travesty of a funeral that occurred late that afternoon. A clergyman and a half dozen of Mr. Morris's acquaintances had driven out from town, but even including them, there were not twenty people who followed the pine box as it was carried across the thin autumn snow and up to its resting place.

Rose was a brave but a pitiful figure. During the final depressing rites Jim Rowan's heart bled for her. He it was who let fall the first shovelful of earth. When the grave had been filled in he saw that Hayward and the clergyman had taken her back down to the cabin.

Jim had secured a team with which to drive the girl in to town, and while the visitors were bidding her good-by he went to his own shack and began putting his few belongings together.

He was mystified when he could not lay his hand upon the little leather case with the old newspaper portrait of Rose, for that was about all that he really cared to take with him. He looked everywhere for it before he finally gave up the search. He had refused Hayward's warning to leave, not because he expected Rose to reconcile herself to his past, not because he now retained the faintest hope

of ever realizing his dream, but because there was something yet to be done, and, moreover, because it was not his nature to come or to go at any man's bidding. Hayward, without doubt, would tell her the truth, sooner or later—for that matter she would learn it anyhow, once she got to town—and it might as well come from his lips as from another's. Under the circumstances, therefore, it seemed as if "Michigan's" luck had indeed about run its course. Whatever came to pass, however, Rose's future could not be left to chance.

He was interrupted in his task by the girl herself. She came to his door and with her she brought Hayward.

"Jim," she began, "Mr. Hayward has been trying to tell me something—"

"What? *Already?*" A flame leaped into Rowan's eyes as he turned them upon the Bonanza foreman.

"Yes, already! It's best to have it out and over with," the latter declared, doggedly.

"I asked him to say it before you, Jim if—if he insists upon saying it at all."

"I merely started to tell her why she couldn't afford to have anything further to do with you," the vistor announced. "I tried to tell her that I love her and want to marry her; that I'll give her a home and end all of her troubles—"

"What was it you said about Jim?" the girl insisted quietly.

Hayward told her; frankly, brutally he repeated what he had previously said. Jim listened in silence.

"Is it true?" Rose turned a strained, white face upon The Michigan Kid.

"Most of it is. Not that about the killing of Thompson, of course. He shot himself because he had lost company money. He came to break me, but the game was square—all my games were square, and he knew it. I just had my usual luck."

"Rose, will you let me take you to town?" Hayward asked, earnestly.

Slowly the girl shook her head. "Jim has arranged to drive me in. I'm sorry you didn't wait a while before—I've had a good deal to bear." When the young man scowled at Rowan and opened his lips to protest, she smiled faintly. "I'll be perfectly safe with him. The Michigan Kid hasn't been accused of killing women, has he?"

"Very well. I'm sorry, too, that it had to come at a time like this. But I thought it best. I'll see you to-morrow, Rose. Forgive me if I've been rough. It's only because—" The speaker stammered, choked, then he turned and went out into the chill twilight.

When the crunch of his footsteps had died out Rose inquired, simply:

"Why did you do it, Jim?"

Rowan answered carelessly: "Oh, I'm just naturally a bad sort, I guess! No great amount of character. I wanted money, and gambling was the easiest way to get it. I always hated work. Of course I had to be tough to get by; they kept me in hot water so long I got hard-boiled—"

"I don't mean that. Why did you come out here with father, the way you did?"

"Well now, I'm not sure that I can explain unless it was because of that hunch I told you about," Jim managed a splendid assumption of sincerity. "We gamblers play hunches, you know. And say, it just proves there's something in them. A mighty queer thing happened to-day, Rose. I didn't mean to tell you yet, but your father was right. There's pay on this claim!"

"Please don't let's talk about that."

"But, Rose, listen! While I was digging up there on the rim the gravel looked good. I took some of it down to the creek and tested it. I can't begin to guess what was in it, but it was rich. You're a rich woman. There's no mistake. It wasn't a 'prospect,' it was big pay, coarse gold!"

For a while the girl sat silent, then abruptly she hid her face in her hands.

"Oh! The pity of it!" she cried. "After he had worked so long and endured so much! Poor father! So patient, so gentle, so old—!" Tears stole through her fingers.

Jim dared not try to comfort this grief; he could not even trust himself to show the sympathy he felt. In a cheerful, matter-of-fact voice, he said:

"He told us he would land in the pay and we wouldn't believe him. But I know he's glad, for it was you he wanted it for, not himself, and everything has come out just the way he would have had it. I—I'll bet he's happy at last."

" 'Michigan's' luck still holds good, doesn't it? Half the claim is yours, Jim."

"Pshaw! That 'partnership' arrangement was a joke. I've got money, lots of it. I could have made things a good deal easier for him and for you, but I didn't dare. No, Rose, it's all yours and you have nothing to worry about any more. You needn't pay any attention to what Hayward said, unless you want to. I know you like him and—he's a mighty nice boy. He has courage and he loves you. He's a good, clean fellow—"

"But, Jim, I don't love him. I don't even like him, any more."

"Then that's that!" Rowan declared, heartily.

"I love somebody else." The girl lifted her tear-stained face. "I'm in love with a boy from

our old town. I think I must have cared for him ever since I was a little girl. And I've been in his thoughts, too. He has carried my picture constantly—"

"Well, well! That's certainly nice." Jim could think of nothing else to say. It required some effort to say that much, and mean it.

"He's an unselfish boy. He did a great deal for father. I think he'd give his life for me. And yet he has never said that he loves me. I had to find it out by chance."

"*Rose!*" All the reserve, all the counterfeit cheerfulness of The Michigan Kid, fell away. It was Jim Rowan, the Dover boy, who stared at her with working face, and exclaimed in a voice suddenly grown hoarse, "You—found that picture!"

"Yes; that night when I was looking for medicine. How long have you had it, Jim?"

"Ever since the day you graduated. I've always loved you, ever since I was a ragged kid and you drove by in your wicker pony cart. Rose dear, it was because of you that I gambled. I wanted money. I think I'd have *killed* to get it—almost. I went through hell. Then when I had my money and had found you I went through hell again because—well, because of the hell I'd been through. I—I'm not much of a man. I'm afraid you've made a mistake—"

Jim did not finish, for the girl held up her arms to him and said, quaveringly, like a weary child:

"Take me, Jim. Please! I'm—so tired!"

So it was that The Michigan Kid's luck held through to the finish.

"Powder"

BEN FURLONG came to the Southern oil fields looking for work. He found it promptly. Seldom, it may be said, did any newcomer land a job more quickly than he, for inside of eighteen hours after his arrival he was on the chain gang and for sixty days thereafter he labored for the sovereign State of Texas. It all came about because of Mr. Furlong's vest.

Ben stepped off the train with sixty dollars upon his person, capital sufficient for any practical oil man in any producing field, but that very evening some new acquaintances invited him into a crap game. Now in Pennsylvania, where Ben hailed from, craps was a pastime, a game of chance indulged in by amateurs purely for purposes of amusement; it was not an exact science nor a means of livelihood, as here. As a result of that free, expansive Texas hospitality Mr. Furlong spent the still and sleepy hours of his first night on a bench in the railroad station.

In the morning he pawned his vest. Vests are useless adornments in a hot country, but he finally found a second-hand shop the proprietor of which agreed to advance him "two bits" on this one. It

was a trifling transaction, but important to the vistor, who badly felt the need of a cup of coffee.

The owner of that vest had explored its pocket at least a dozen times during the night. What was his surprise, therefore, when the nimble-fingered purchaser found in it a twenty-five-cent piece that somehow had worked through a rip in the pocket lining and into a resting place that had entirely escaped the clumsy digits of its wearer.

Enthusiastically Mr. Furlong thanked the discoverer and held out his hand, but the latter grinned derisively and pocketed the coin. Thereupon an argument developed. The oil man contended that he had pawned the vest, not its contents; the merchant advanced the ancient common-law doctrine of "finders keepers, losers weepers." Eventually Furlong went over the counter after his money and got it. The tussle was brief, but when he emerged from the pawnshop a moment later he walked directly into the arms of a policeman, proving that this pressure upon the pawnbroker's windpipe had not been sufficient to totally paralyze the latter's vocal cords.

After hearing both sides of the story the guardian of the peace decided that his timely arrival had broken up a mild case of highway robbery complicated with incipient assault and battery, and later the police magistrate concurred in some such

view. At any rate, Furlong soon found himself a member of the street gang, and for sixty days thereafter he toiled at numerous degrading tasks under the watchful eye of a gentleman with a long mustache and a sawed-off shotgun. The weather was hot and he did not feel the need of his vest.

This experience soured Furlong upon Texas municipalities of the larger sort, and when at last he was free to go where he wished he left town. He begged a ride from the friendly driver of a pipe truck bound out into the country, and by nightfall he was among the oil derricks. Chance led him to the little town of Opportunity.

Opportunity was a product of the recent petroleum excitement. Originally it had consisted of a general store, a blacksmith shop, a church, and a few farmhouses clustered about a dusty crossroads, but, following the discovery of liquid gold, it had grown into something uncommon, something quite extraordinary as towns go. To begin with, it was amazingly ugly. Oil derricks were everywhere, for the town site lay directly over a pool of exceeding richness, and in places these structures stood so close together that their straddling legs interlocked and necessity had compelled the owners to board them in to prevent the oil from spraying over their neighbors. The town itself was stained and spattered with it—streets, houses, residents

alike—and three times the place had been wiped out by fire when some pipe line had burst or a gusher had been ignited. It was built upon the ashes of itself; its yards were paved with cinders and when the midday sun shone upon them they radiated a cruel heat. Back of every store and residence was a dugout—a dirt-covered storm cellar—fashioned as a refuge against the next conflagration.

No, there was nothing alluring about Opportunity except its name. Places of entertainment it had, to be sure, for on Saturday nights when the crews came in it resembled some frontier mining camp at the height of its boom, and relaxation was a necessity; but prohibition had come and in Texas the Law rode herd on all recognized forms of vice. In consequence its pleasures were denatured. Instead of palaces of sin it had soft-drink stands, each one enveloped in a swarm of flies; for pure amusement it maintained a roller-skating rink. The rumble issuing from this latter sink of iniquity during its busy hours could be heard for half a mile and resembled the roar of a stamp mill or the sound of a heavy surf.

Ben Furlong canvassed this town for work, but he was unsuccessful, and after a day or so he went afield. He managed somehow to eat and to find places in which to sleep, but nowhere did he en-

counter a job. He was very dusty and quite hungry when at last he stopped in at the Durham house.

Experience had taught him by this time that it was more profitable to beg favors from the permanent residents of the country than from the visitors, such as well-drillers, casing crews, and the like, for in the farmhouses there were women and Ben had good luck with women. They liked him. Usually, also, there was a barn to sleep in and odd jobs which needed doing and which paid for a meal.

This was a rather better-looking place than the average Texas homestead, and when he knocked at the kitchen door a girl appeared who was very much better-looking than the average Texas homesteader. She was, in fact, a very pretty girl.

She readily fetched Ben a drink of water, and while he rested she talked to him. That was, no doubt, because of his smile. He informed her that he had been raised in the Pennsylvania fields and was a good, practical oil man; then noting her expression of doubt, he warned her:

"Never judge a horse by his harness! These pants are on their last legs, but that's the fault of the vest."

With unquenchable cheerfulness he recounted his unfortunate experience with the pawnbroker, and his manner of telling the story made the girl laugh. That led to food. There being no chores

to do, Ben sat in the kitchen and chatted with the girl while she cooked something for him, and in the course of their conversation he learned that her name was Betty Durham, that her parents were dead, and that the farm belonged to her aunt, with whom she had lived ever since she was a little girl. The aunt had gone to Opportunity in the family flivver.

"Funny, you cooking for a tramp driller like me and your aunt owning acreage like this," Ben remarked. "Isn't this land on the structure?"

"Sure! It's worth a lot of money. That well over yonder"—fork in hand, Miss Durham indicated a derrick not far away—"belongs to us."

From where he sat Furlong could see that the timbers of the tower were still bright and unstained, thus advertising the melancholy fact that the well itself was not a producer, so he inquired:

"What's wrong with it? Dry?"

"Dry nothing! They're not down yet. They've got a fishing job—been at it for a couple of weeks."

"Gee!" The visitor shook his head. "That's running somebody in debt."

"I reckon we know it. Aunt Mary's crazy. Maddox sent her to town for a new fishing tool. Tiller Maddox, he's our driller. It's Aunt Mary's well."

Furlong opened his eyes in genuine astonishment. "You mean your aunt is putting it down with her own money?"

"I mean just that."

"This *is* like a dream, having ham and eggs cooked by an heiress!"

Miss Durham laughed lightly. "Sudden money certainly makes a change in people and we'll probably do like the others when we get ours. A lot of folks in this county are too good to cook ham and eggs nowadays, but they weren't awhile back. Most of them were lucky to have the ham. Of course we're not rich yet, but— It's this way: when the first oil talk commenced we'd of been glad to get the farm drilled on most any kind of royalty, but nobody would lease it. When they finally got ready, Aunt Mary wanted a bonus—two bits an acre—and she wouldn't listen to Uncle Joe's arguments. By and bye they offered two bits, but by that time she wanted a dollar. When they offered a dollar she changed her mind and asked ten, and then when they were willing to pay ten she jumped to a hundred. She's awfully ambitious, that way. That's what this talk of quick money did to her. Then the companies got together, or the boom kind of petered out, or something, and it began to look as if Uncle Joe would be lucky to make any kind of a deal. He finally laid his ears

back and leased a small block. Then he up and got killed."

"That's too bad."

"It was an accident. A powder wagon let go." The speaker's face grew wistful, she stared out across the arid countryside for a moment or two. "Uncle Joe loved me, but—Aunt Mary's his second wife; we're not really kinfolks. It might just as well have been Maddox who got killed; he was as close to the wagon as Uncle Joe and yet he wasn't touched. Funny, too, because he's always been afraid of the stuff and has a hunch he'll be blown up. All you have to say to him is 'powder' and—"

"How'd your aunt come to put down this new well?"

"Tiller drilled the one on that block we leased, and after Uncle Joe was killed he quit the company and sort of took charge of things for Aunt Mary. It wasn't a big well, but the royalty is enough to pay for this one. If it comes in—well, I won't cook any more ham and eggs, so you'd better make the most of these. Yes, and you'd better come and get them; they're done." Miss Durham set a plate on the table and Furlong drew up his chair.

With the curiosity natural to his calling, the visitor inquired more specifically about the nature of

the mishap that had halted Maddox's progress, but he learned little. He inferred, however, that the royalties from the first well were dwindling at an alarming rate and that any considerable delay in completing the new well might therefore result in ruin to the owner. It was a prospect that naturally gave Betty and her aunt grave concern.

When Ben had finished eating he said: "Maybe I can give this driller of yours some help. I've worked on a good many fishing jobs. D'you think he'd let me try?"

"He will if I tell him to," the girl declared. "He's tried everything anybody has told him to try. Who knows? Maybe you can do it."

The speaker put on her sunbonnet and together she and Furlong went across the valley to the well.

Tiller Maddox was a swarthy man of about thirty-five; his eyes were bold and black and set close together. He greeted the Durham girl with an easy familiarity, a suggestion of proprietorship that gave the visitor cause for thought, but towards Furlong he was none too cordial and when Betty explained the reason for the latter's presence Maddox frowned.

"Another wise guy, eh? Every rope-choker in ten miles has been tryin' to show us how smart he is. What d'you know about fishin', stranger?"

"Not much," Ben confessed, "but I've had some luck."

"Oh, I've had plenty of luck, myself!" Maddox asserted. "But I never had any *good* luck lettin' strangers monkey with my work. If you jim up the well, I take the blame."

"I won't jim anything."

"What'll you charge for this here miracle of yours?"

Impatiently Miss Durham exclaimed, "What's the difference how much he charges if he can do—?"

"I've been paid for any help I can give you," Furlong declared. "Probably I can't do anything, but so far I don't even know what's wrong. Do you mind telling me?"

"We've got a bolt in the hole."

"A *bolt?*"

"Sure! A six-inch steel bolt. It worked loose and dropped out of a tool."

"That's a new one," Ben admitted. "Why don't you drill it out, pound it to pieces?"

Maddox grinned. "That's what we been tryin' to do, but it's tempered harder than the bit. It dulls every tool we use and all we been doin' for for two weeks is sharpen steel."

"Can't you drill past it?"

"How you goin' to sidetrack a six-inch bolt loose in the bottom of a hole?"

"You can drive it into the wall."

"Oh, you can, can you? We're into a stratter of iron pyrites an' the rock's dam' near as hard as the bolt. It's much as ever a tool will cut it at all. That bolt just shifts around in the bottom of the hole like it was in a steel cup, an' it's too small to grapple. I s'pose we could get holt of it with some fancy kind of a magnet if we could get holt of some fancy kind of a magnet that would get holt of it." Again Maddox grinned.

Betty Durham was staring as Furlong with an apprehensive pucker between her brows. "Ain't that our luck, for a little bitty old bolt to ruin everything? Can you think of any way—?"

"I can think of one way that won't cost much to try."

"I don't want any strangers experimentin' around—" Maddox began; but the girl exclaimed, sharply,

"You've been experimenting for two weeks at a hundred dollars a day, haven't you? It's our well. Let Mr. Furlong have a go at it."

The driller executed an exaggerated gesture of acquiescence. "Right you are, Betty! But if this feller puts it on the bum, don't blame me."

Then to Ben he announced: "Help yourself, pardner. You heard the boss."

When Furlong had fully satisfied himself as to conditions he took off his coat and went to work. He knew of no fishing tool so designed as to pick up an object as small and as easily movable as a six-inch bolt, therefore he made one. He took a short length of steel casing of a diameter small enough to slip into the well, and in one end of this he cut teeth several inches long. It was a labor that consumed time: he was still at it when Betty reappeared at the well about dark and advised him that his supper was waiting.

Mrs. Durham had returned from town. She was a woman of indeterminate age. Her eyes were pale; her nose was hooked like the beak of a hawk; her lips were thin and set in avaricious lines. Immediately upon meeting Furlong she wanted to know whether he believed his experiment would succeed, how he proposed to go about it, how long it would take, and the like. Ben was noncommittal and he refused to raise her hopes. Before he had finished his meal he had convinced himself that the woman stood in some sort of dread of Tiller Maddox and that her fear of antagonizing him almost equaled her anxiety for Furlong's success. Ben wondered why. Another fact he discovered—Betty and her aunt were not on the best of terms.

After supper, by the light of a gasoline torch, Furlong resumed his work the while Maddox vainly tried, with the new device which his employer had brought out from town, to grapple that obstinate piece of steel a fifth of a mile beneath his feet. But it was blind work, monotonous work, dispiriting work; time after time the clumsy fishing tool was raised and lowered, but its jaws refused to seize the troublesome bolt. It was a job as hopeless and as baffling as trying to pick up a pin with a pair of fire tongs attached to a string.

The engineer of the rig watched Furlong's work with the interest of a fellow machinist, and of him the latter inquired finally:

"Say! How come Mr. Durham to get killed?"

"He was blowed up. It was when the Planet Company was getting ready to put down that well on the northeast corner. Maddox was workin' for the company then—movin' the rig onto the ground. A powder wagon came by an' the driver stopped to ask his way. You've seem them trucks—six hundred odd quarts of nitroglycerine in square cans all set in felt-lined racks to keep 'em from jarring. I allus been scared of 'em, but them drivers pound their wagons over these rough roads like it's so much molasses they got. Old man Durham went across to the road and give him directions—he stood there watchin' the wagon as it

drove on. The driver was trottin' his hosses, an' when he crossed the railroad track it let go. Jar set it off, I s'pose. Tiller says he saw it all, but he don't remember hearin' a sound or feelin' a shock of any sort. All he seen was a big black cloud, an' when he looked for Old man Durham he wasn't there. The fence was gone, too."

"What happened to the driver?"

"What d'you reckon happened? All the trace they ever found of him or the outfit was part of a hoss's leg hangin' on a telegraph cross-arm about a hundred yards up the grade. There was a hole thirty foot wide where the wagon had been and the railroad iron was corkscrewed for a quarter of a mile. They found quite a bit of Mr. Durham—enough to hold a funeral over."

"And Maddox wasn't scratched! That stuff certainly acts queer at times."

"They figgered some air current was responsible. Kind of a Godsend for Tiller, wasn't it?"

"Not to be killed? Sure—"

"Naw! To get in with the widder an' Betty. Lucky for them, too, that he took to lookin' out for 'em. If he makes this well they'll be movin' into one of them Dallas mansions with marble bedsteads."

"Humph! He'll never make a well if he keeps

dropping hardware in it. In my country a driller that careless would lose his job."

"Tiller won't lose his job," the engineer asserted, positively. "He don't lose anything he goes after."

In the course of time Furlong finished cutting the end of his steel casing into a series of teeth, and these teeth he then bent slightly inward. This done, he attached the device to a tool and lowered it into the hole. Even Betty Durham and her aunt Mary, who looked on with growing suspense, understood now how he proposed to pick up that bolt. He had shaped those tapering teeth so that they resembled the curving fingers of a hand, and his delicate task was to drive the casing home against the steel-hard bottom of the well until those fingers closed, until he clinched them over the obstacle. It was a task less difficult than it sounds.

Furlong himself handled the rig during this operation, and even Maddox could find no fault with the way he did it. When, after what seemed an interminable time, the wire cable began to stream up out of the depths and wind itself in smooth, black layers upon the drum, the two women pressed in upon the derrick floor.

Out of the well-mouth finally slid the fishing tool; it stopped, hung motionless with the lower end at the level of their eyes. The teeth had been bent inward, jammed together by the blows from

above; inside the basket thus formed and tightly bitten between two of those prongs was a battered six-inch piece of steel.

When Furlong had finished washing up he found Betty Durham waiting for him.

"Come over to the house," she said. "You must be tired."

"I told you I was lucky," the young man declared, with a grin.

"Lucky, nothing. You've got sense."

"Simple, wasn't it? I wonder Maddox never thought of it."

Betty stirred; impatiently she exclaimed: "Oh, he's too busy thinking about something—! Say! We've got an extra room, but Aunt Mary says it wouldn't look right for you to sleep there. Don't that make you sick?"

"How about the barn?"

"That's what she proposed. Come on. We'll fix it somehow."

It was dark; the trail through the cactus and the mesquite was dim, but Betty knew it by heart, and where its meanderings were indistinguishable she took Furlong's hand and guided him.

"I suppose you think Aunt Mary's crazy, risking all her money like this," she said.

"I sure do." the man admitted. "This thing will show you the chances she's taking. Suppose

that bolt had been something else, something we couldn't get hold of? There's a thousand things can happen to a well."

"I know. But she's—greedy. She always was. Tiller talked her into it after Uncle Joe died, and she wouldn't listen to me."

"It's a lot safer to let the big companies do the drilling, and be satisfied with a royalty."

"Some people can't be satisfied," the girl said, quietly. Then after a moment: "Uncle Joe never intended to leave the whole farm to her. They didn't hitch very well. He said he was going to leave part of it to me, but—I guess he never got around to do it. I'll bet Aunt Mary's sorry by this time that she listened to Tiller; there's so many things a driller can do to a well."

"Pshaw! Is he that kind of a man?"

"What kind of a man? Men are all alike, aren't they—when they've got reason to be?"

"She better fire him."

"I guess she can't, or dassent. . . . Funny my talking this way to you and not knowing you only a few hours. I'd better mind my own business. Here we are. You wait while I get a light."

They had arrived at the house, and the girl left her companion outside. She reappeared in a few minutes with a lantern and a couple of patchwork

comforters. These latter she surrendered to Ben, then led the way to the barn.

Like most farms in the oil country, this one had been allowed to run down, and with the exception of some chickens and a few dispirited cattle there was no live stock left upon it. There still remained, however, some old fodder; it was dusty and musty, but suitable enough for a bed, and Furlong announced that he was delighted with these sleeping arrangements. He set the lantern down and walked to the door with Betty. There he said:

"You've been mighty nice to me. I wish that fishing job had been harder."

"Why?"

"It would have taken longer."

The girl's face was dimly illuminated as she smiled up at Furlong. She was the prettiest girl he had ever known and he felt a great liking, a great sympathy for her. The clasp of her warm hand as she had guided him along the dark trail had affected him in an unaccountable manner, and now it affected him again in the same way when she laid it in his. A sudden recklessness overwhelmed him and before he knew what he was doing he had bent forward and kissed her.

The girl was startled, but she did not recoil. Curiously she inquired; "Why did you do that?"

"I don't know. I—couldn't help it, I guess. I didn't intend to, but—" Ben floundered; he felt his face burning hotly.

"Tiller tried that and I slapped him. I've known him a long time too,—!" Miss Durham shook her head, apparently more perplexed at her own lack of resentment than surprised at Furlong's boldness. "I must like you pretty well."

"I wish you would—did. I—think you're wonderful."

"Queer!" Betty turned to go. A moment later she called back through the gloom, "I'll call you when breakfast is ready."

Furlong was not altogether surprised when, on the following morning, Tiller Maddox offered him a job. Maddox, it was plain, was acting upon orders, and he took no pains to conceal his dislike for the new hand; nevertheless, Ben accepted the proffer. Aside from the fact that he needed work, his interest in Betty Durham was now sufficient to make almost any sacrifice worth while.

In the days thereafter he tried to fathom the peculiar relationship existing between Maddox and the two women, but he did not succeed very well. The driller, it was evident, had his heart set upon Betty, and in his attempt to win her Mrs. Durham was his ally: nevertheless, for some unknown reason the aunt disliked and distrusted the

man. About all that Ben could make sure of was the fact that in some manner not readily apparent the oil well was being used by Maddox as a weapon; that somehow it had become the stake in a three-cornered game.

Furlong and Betty meanwhile managed to see a good deal of each other, but they met clandestinely. Neither of them openly referred to this fact, and, although the girl pretended that it was her aunt whom she feared, Ben very well knew that it was Maddox. No longer, by the way, did he apologize when he kissed her, and their stolen moments together had become very sweet.

Work on the well progressed as rapidly as could be expected. Inch by inch, foot by foot, the heavy steel bits cut through the rock; length after length was added to the casing, and as it neared the level of the oil-bearing structure "indications" became evident; occasional sighs and gurgles issued from the well mouth as gas gathered and released itself. Its odor was at times quite strong.

It was at this time that Maddox and Furlong clashed.

Some new tackle was being slung and Ben had been sent up aloft while the foreman issued directions from below. It was heavy work. Ben was forced to cling to the derrick timbers or to balance himself upon a narrow plank, and his progress at

times did not suit the elder man. Maddox was in a surly mood, anyhow, and he became profane. Furlong was hot and irritable. He answered back, whereupon the man below flared out angrily:

"You do like I tell you an' don't argue, or I'll come up there an' give you a dam' good beating!"

The rigging was finally secured in place and Maddox was occupying himself with something else when he felt a hand upon his shoulder. He turned to find Furlong at his side. The latter's eyes were blazing. In a voice ominously harsh and vibrant with fury he said:

"I came down to get that beating. I want it now."

The other members of the crew froze in various attitudes of startled suspense. The two men stared at each other.

Furlong was a burly, thick-necked youth: he was as hard as iron and in his gaze at this moment was an evil quality quite unexpected. His enmity for the driller had finally foamed over. In proximity to this flaming passion Maddox's smoldering dislike gave off no heat; nor at short notice could he fan its embers into a blaze. After a brief survey, pregnant with possibilities, he turned his head and winked at the other men. In a feeble effort at jocularity he said:

"I told you I'd come up there and give it to you.

I never ast you to come down here an' get it." He guffawed loudly at his own humor and walked away. Furlong stood shaking in his tracks.

That evening Maddox went over to the farmhouse. Evenings in this thirsty land, like evenings upon the desert, were cool, refreshing, beautiful. The brazen sky cooled, a blessed breeze played through the scrubby bush and brought faint fragrances unnoticed at other hours; the harsh outlines of unlovely objects were softened; birds twittered; Nature filled her lungs and took on new vigor.

Mrs. Durham was rocking upon the little front porch, and of her the man inquired:

"Where's Betty?"

"Her and Ben have gone to town."

Maddox scowled. "I allowed they had."

"He's gone in to buy himself some clothes and she took the car—"

"He won't need no more clothes than he's got, on this job," asserted the driller. "He's all through an' washed up."

"What's happened, Tiller?"

"We had a row. I was a fool to put him on, in the first place, but his week's up Friday."

Mrs. Durham ceased rocking; her sallow face became more yellow. With an effort she said:

"He's a right smart hand, Tiller. I'd ruther you didn't fire him."

"The hell you'd ruther!" Maddox exclaimed, angrily. "What you got to say about it?"

"Why, it's my prop'ty, my well—"

"*Is* it?"

"Y—you know what I mean. He's smart, I tell you. Didn't he fish that bolt?"

"Sure! An' didn't you hire him straight off, so's to spy on me?"

"*Tiller!* It's no such thing. Why should I spy on you? What you been doin' that you need spyin'—?"

"Shut up an' listen to me. He's fired Friday night an' he gets off this place the next mornin'. So that's that! Saturday, sometime, the powder wagon'll be here an' early Monday the men are comin' to shoot the well. We got a big one; I'll bet my life on that. I can tell! Why, she's makin' gas an' tryin' her best to let go, but"—the speaker paused, then finished slowly, distinctly —"there ain't agoin' to be no well whatever until I'm took care of."

The widow's colorless eyes fixed themselves hypnotically upon the swarthy face of the man before her. He continued:

"I wasn't gettin' along any too good with Betty

before this feller showed up, but since he came she won't have nothin' to do with me."

"I did the best I could," Mrs. Durham declared, nervously, "but she says she won't marry you. She goes hog wild every time I talk about it."

"There's ways to *make* a girl marry. You got to make her marry me before that well comes in, or it's just like I said—*it ain't comin' in!*"

"Tiller!" gasped the woman. "You dassent do —anything to it. Not *now!*"

"Oh, dassent I? Who'll stop me? *You* won't. That little old bolt made a lot of trouble, didn't it? Well, that's nothin'. It just shows how easy it is to—"

"Did *you* do that?" Mrs. Durham bleated, in dismay.

"I ain't sayin' I did or I didn't. But remember, if this well ain't a producer, you're blowed up, and it ain't a-goin' to produce till there's a Mrs. Tiller Maddox to see it and to get her share! We bargained that all out, long ago. Yes, an' I ain't afraid of you goin' back on our deal, either. You don't dast."

"I—I'll try again."

"You better do more'n *try*. I'll give you just one more chance. If she don't come across, I want you to go visit your folks Saturday evenin', an' leave her here. Understand?"

For a moment Mrs. Durham stared at the speaker, then she said:

"Tiller Maddox, you're a dirty dog!"

"Say! I've took all the back talk I can stand for one day. You heard me. You do like I tell you, an' you needn't to get back from your visit till Monday. That'll give her all Sunday to cry. She's sensible. She'll come around when she's had time to think it over an' do a lot of cryin'."

Not until Ben and Betty had finished their shopping and were on their way home did he tell her about the trouble he had had with Maddox that morning.

"He let on he was fooling, but of course he'll fire me the first chance he gets," Furlong predicted.

"Oh, Ben! Why did you do it?"

"We were bound to tie into each other sooner or later. You can't choose a time to get fighting mad; it's as much as you can do to pick good footing."

"Aunt Mary won't let him fire you. She doesn't trust him any more than I do."

"Say! What has he got on her?"

The girl did not look up from her driving. She fetched a deep breath as she said: "I'd dearly love to know. There's something queer about it. . . . Uncle Joe was a sweet, easy-going man and she rode him with a Spanish bit. She never would

have let him take me in, when my folks died, only I did all the work. But he sure loved me. When the oil excitement came they rowed and fought for months. Whenever he got an offer she claimed he was trying to give the farm away and threatened to go to law. I told you about that. He stood it as long as he could; then he up and announced that I'd been more of a daughter to him than she'd been a wife and he aimed to give most of his money to me anyhow, and then he made that lease with the Planet people. That's how Maddox came. I think she'd have poisoned me, if she dared, after what uncle said. When he was killed I supposed, of course, she'd throw me out, but she didn't. No use to do it, I suppose, inasmuch as he hadn't left any writing. As a matter of fact, she was better to me than she'd ever been. That's what makes me wonder sometimes—"

"Wonder what?"

"If he didn't tell Tiller something. Something that makes her scared of him. Sometimes she acts like it's only because of him that she's nice to me. . . . I don't know what I'd do if she sent me away. I haven't got a red cent. There isn't a living soul I could—"

Ben passed his arm around the slim, girlish figure and drew it to him. "That'll be about all for you!" He kissed the cheek next to his and Betty

hungrily pressed her face closer. "Good thing you aren't an heiress—and me with less than a hundred dollars!"

"You behave yourself, or you'll wreck this car," the girl warned him.

Maddox carried out his intention. He discharged Furlong on Friday night, explaining that the well was down, and the next morning Ben broke the news to his sweetheart. Betty was indignant. She was for appealing to her aunt, but he refused to permit her. He now had money in his pocket. There were better jobs to be had, and he intended to find one in the immediate neighborhood where he could see her often. He promised to let her hear from him in a day or so.

Betty's face was flushed, her eyes were shining, when she entered the house after he had gone. She was surprised to find her aunt awaiting her.

"Tiller came over the other night while you was in town," Mrs. Durham began.

"Did he?"

"He talked a lot about you. Tiller's a fine man, dearie—"

Betty broke out irritably: "Don't let's start that all over again."

"Oh, your head's full of this Furlong, I suppose! But what's he got? Nothing. Not even

a job. Now Tiller wants to marry you and—you better do it."

"You know very well I'll do nothing of the sort."

"Maybe you won't and maybe you will." Mrs. Durham's lips set themselves in lines of inflexibility. "If you got a smitch of sense you will. D'you want to be poor all your life or d'you want to be rich?"

"I tell you I won't! I won't!" declared the girl. "The big, black, greasy brute!"

"Now don't fly off the handle till I'm through. I've been pretty good to you—"

"I don't see that you have."

"Well, I have," snapped the other. "T'ain't every woman would take you in, give you clothes, send you to school—"

"Uncle Joe did that. You didn't."

"I kept you after he died, didn't I? Any reason why I couldn't of thrown you out? No."

"I've earned my keep ever since I came. You'd have paid more for a hired girl than I cost."

"Oh, hush up and let me finish! We allus fight like this. Your Uncle Joe cared a lot for you and —and I want to respect his wishes. When that well comes in this farm'll be worth—I don't know what. Anyhow, my heart's set on seeing you get a good home and have everything. How'd you

like to live in a fine house in Dallas, or somewhere, and have a big car and a piano and money in the bank and di'mond rings and—"

"What ails you? Are you losing your mind, Aunt Mary?"

"You can have 'em if you marry Tiller. Marry Furlong and you'll spend your life over a cook stove."

"How can Tiller give me things like that?"

"I'll give 'em to you."

After a moment Betty inquired, curiously, "How much will you give?"

It was Mrs. Durham's turn to hesitate, her words came with an effort. "I don't know—mebbe a quarter interest."

"Humph!" The exclamation was one of scorn.

"There's gratitude for you! Mebbe if it's a real big well I'd do better. You—you've got to do it, Betty!" the widow cried in distraction. "If you don't he'll ruin everything. He said so. If that well don't come in the farm ain't worth—"

"So! That's why you're so generous. Now you listen to me. I wouldn't marry Tiller Maddox, not for all the oil in Texas, not if it was to save your life."

"Then you'll get out of my house."

"All right, I'll get out this minute." Betty turned away, whereupon the elder woman exclaimed:

"Wait! Don't make up your mind in a hurry. I—I'm going over to Cousin Anna's—"

"When? What for?"

"Right after dinner. You think it over while I'm gone, dearie. I feel like you was my own kin. I want to do right by you and—"

"Rats!" said the girl.

Opportunity lay hot and gasping under the sun. There was no shade out-of-doors, for nothing grew in the streets, not even grass; its cinder yards, its board walls and iron roofs radiated waves of heat like those from a stove. Even the breeze that swept across the waterless countryside was blistering and it carried a burden of choking dust.

Late in the afternoon Ben Furlong entered the skating rink, paid his admission at the turnstile, and went through. Here, at least, was a place to sit down out of the sun. An amazingly discordant mechanical piano was playing, and in time with it sweating men in overalls were skating arm-in-arm with hard-faced girls in khaki knickerbockers and soiled shirtwaists.

Out of the whirling throng upon the floor shot a figure; it was Ben's friend, the engineer of the Maddox rig. He rolled up to the bench where Furlong sat and collapsed upon it. He still wore

the grease and the grime of his calling, but his exertions had blended them, run them together.

"Whew! It's hard work havin' a good time in this town," he panted. "Landed a job yet?"

"I've got some prospects lined up. What's the matter? You fired, too?"

"Naw! Maddox laid us off for the day. Miz' Durham brought us in."

"Did Betty come with her?" Ben eagerly inquired.

The engineer shook his head; a grin spread over his face. "Say! You know how scared Tiller is of nitroglycerine? When we left he was hidin' out in the brush like a quail. The powder wagon came an' he took it on the run."

"Powder wagon? What's a powder wagon doing there?" Ben inquired.

"Why, he aims to shoot the well. He got a permit an' the stuff's on the ground, ready for the men."

"He's crazy if he shoots that well!" Furlong declared. "What's he thinking about?"

"So I told him. 'Leave her alone an' she'll blow herself in,' I says to him. She's coughin' now, an' I bet as many wells has been ruined by that stuff as they is wells that's been made. You know that, Ben. But he tells me to mind my own business."

"I'm going to see Mrs. Durham." Ben rose, but the other explained:

"She's gone away over Sunday to visit her kinfolks."

"Who's looking out for Betty?"

"I dunno. Tiller, I reckon."

Furlong frowned. For a while he listened inattentively to his companion, then he rose and left the rink.

Conditions all over the oil fields, as he well knew, were unsettled, and he did not relish the thought of Betty out there alone in that farmhouse; but even more disturbing was the fact that Maddox proposed to shoot the Durham well. What ailed the man? If experience had taught Ben anything, it had taught him that an oil-bearing structure such as existed in that locality rendered the use of explosives highly hazardous. Only in case the oil stubbornly refused to flow would its use be wise. But this well gave every indication of blowing itself in, with a little help! Maddox was indeed insane.

After some indecision Ben decided to warn Betty. It was none of his business, to be sure, but a word from her might induce the aunt to go slowly and perhaps save the cost of the well. It would be criminal to leave her in ignorance of the risks she ran. He tried to hire a car to run him

back out to the farm, but what few were for hire were out, and it was some time before he could discover a truck that was later going in that direction.

It was considerably after dark when Furlong left Opportunity; he had to walk the last three miles, so it was late bedtime when he finally arrived at the Durham homestead.

Evidently Betty was asleep; at any rate, the farmhouse windows were dark and Ben wondered how he could best awaken her without causing alarm. Visitors in the country at this time of night were not common. He decided to call softly from outside her window, so he closed the gate quietly behind him and made his way around the house.

He paused in surprise when he had turned the corner of the building, for the kitchen door was open. A momentary panic swept over him; then he drew a breath of relief, for at that moment he heard the girl's muffled voice.

"Who's there?" she cried.

He opened his lips to speak reassuringly, but the sound died in his throat, for inside Betty's room he heard a man's voice, then a stir, a movement. This was followed by a crash, as if a chair had been overturned, then a scream.

Furlong uttered a shout; he leaped forward.

Some marauder had entered the house just ahead of him. Incredible as it seemed, he had arrived barely in time—He plunged in through the kitchen door and fetched up sprawling across the table. There was a crash of crockery.

"Betty!" he yelled. "*Betty!*" He made for the door beyond.

That throaty clamor from the girl's room, meanwhile, continued. There were hasty movements, the sounds of a struggle.

Furlong had never been inside the front part of the house, but its plan was simple and he was guided by those shrieks of terror. The door to Betty's room was closed, but it opened when he found the knob. He glimpsed the dim square of a window opposite and silhouetted against it he saw the girl herself, then of a sudden he felt the floor fall away beneath his feet and realized that he had been projected headlong into a bottomless abyss.

The next he knew Betty Durham was holding his head in her lap and splashing water into his face. It struck him as queer that the lamp should be burning when only the fraction of an instant before all had been darkness.

Mechanically he made an effort to rise, but could not manage it.

"Must have hit on my head," he mumbled thickly, and raised groping fingers. Then he sat

up. He knew now that he had not fallen into a pit.

"Where are they? What's—happened?"

Betty was sobbing wildly; her hair hung in a cascade about her shoulders; she was clad only in her nightdress, and it was soaked with the water she had poured over Ben to revive him.

Beside the open door to the hall lay the wreck of a chair; two of its legs were splintered, broken off: Ben realized more clearly now what it was that had crashed down upon his head. With an effort he scrambled dizzily to his feet. Water was trickling into his eyes and blinding him; he brushed it away, then discovered, to his great surprise, that it was not water at all, but blood, his own blood. His head felt numb and twice its normal size; his brain did not function clearly and his limbs refused to obey him.

Betty's voice came to him as if from a long distance; she was telling him something, trying to make him understand that they were alone in the house and that their assailant had fled. When this became plain to Furlong, he sat down.

It was some time before the girl succeeded in stanching that flow of blood from Ben's scalp and in binding up the wound, for she was scarcely in condition to render help to anybody. By the time her task was completed Ben had managed to

get a pretty clear idea of what had happened. She had been awakened by a sound and had realized that somebody was in her room; she had uttered a frightened challenge, only to feel groping hands upon her, to find herself in the grasp of some unseen person. She retained no very clear recollection of anything after that; the rest was a hideous nightmare. Not until the miscreant had bolted out of the house and she had finally managed somehow to strike a light was she made aware of the reason for his flight. Then she had stumbled over Ben and had realized that it was his voice she had heard calling to her, that it was the sound of his coming that had interrupted the attack. His plight had done a good deal to bring her back to herself, but now she threatened to again abandon her self-control.

Furlong checked this by saying: "Betty Durham! You've got nothing on but your nightie!"

It was some time later when the girl emerged from her room, dressed after a fashion, to find her deliverer waiting in the kitchen with a scowl upon his face.

"You got a gun?" he inquired, harshly.

"No, Ben. Why?"

"I'm going to kill Maddox."

For a moment Betty stared at the speaker; with

shaking fingers she plucked at her dress. It was in a thin, reedy voice that she said:

"It wasn't Maddox."

"How do you know?"

"Oh, I know! It wasn't Maddox."

"Are you sure?" The girl nodded, and Ben bowed his throbbing head in his hands. "I'm glad," he groaned. "Providence certainly brought me back. It wouldn't happen that way once in a thousand times. Whoever it was, I'll find him."

Both the man and the girl were in wretched condition. The rest of the night they sat together, watching the clock and listening for a possible return of the marauder, waiting for the day to break. It was a considerable relief to hear the members of the drilling crew when they passed about two o'clock. Thereafter they felt more secure.

It was shortly after they had finished breakfast that Furlong was surprised to discover signs of activity, movements, goings-on at the well which caused him to stare fixedly, then to announce, incredulously:

"Say! I believe Maddox is fixing to shoot the well!"

Betty took her place at his side. "Why—he can't! He dassent! The powder men won't be here till to-morrow."

"All the same, he's doing something queer. See those cans—those shiny things?"

"You couldn't hire Tiller to touch nitroglycerine. He's scared of it—"

Ben uttered an oath. "I tell you he's filling those cartridges. He's crazy! You've got to stop him!"

Betty turned white; she shook her head. "I won't go near the place. It's—it's Aunt Mary's well."

"Then I'll stop him. Why, it's ten to one he'll sear the rock, ruin the whole job and— Damned if I don't believe he's *trying* to do that very thing!"

Furlong started for the door, but Betty clung to him. When he pushed on past her she followed him. Together they hurried across the field and took the path through the mesquite. As they went the girl continued to implore him not to interfere.

Halfway to the drilling camp they met the engineer hastening towards the farmhouse, and the latter announced, breathlessly: "Tiller's gone plumb off his nut! He's goin' to shoot the well himself. You better stay clear."

Furlong dashed past the speaker and emerged from the shelter of the bushes in time to see Maddox gingerly swing a long, cylindrical tin over the well mouth and guide it into the opening. A new

manila rope had been run through a block on the derrick, and with this he lowered the charge.

Ben yelled at him; he waved his arms. Maddox glanced over his shoulder, then let the line slide smoothly through his hands.

"Take my tip an' don't go too close," the engineer shouted. "He ain't no powder man an' that well's makin' gas. She blows off every few minutes."

Betty seconded this warning in frantic tones of appeal: "Let him go, Ben. He knows what he's doing. You've got no right stopping him. You'll just make trouble—"

"It's none of my business," the latter agreed, impatiently, "but there's something crooked—" He ceased speaking; then he seized Betty and whirled her around with the sharp command, "*Run! Get back!*"

They were still perhaps a hundred yards from the well, but Furlong's practiced eye had seen something that suddenly raised the hair upon his head. That rope from which was suspended the heavy charge of liquid death no longer hung vertically, it no longer ran over the block and into the casing; instead it was falling in loops about Maddox. *It was coming up out of the well!*

Maddox himself was alive to what had happened. That which he most greatly feared had

come upon him, and he also turned to flee. But the platform was slippery or else he tripped over the rope and fell. The others heard his cry of terror. He quickly regained his feet, but to Furlong it seemed as if his movements thereafter were maddeningly slow and deliberate, as if the whole scene before him was being photographed upon his brain by a slow-motion moving-picture camera.

The engineer's apprehensions had been well grounded. Once again gas had been released far down in the earth, and now, like breath forced from the lungs of some tortured giant, it rose, propelling the smoothly fitting cartridge of nitroglycerine ahead of it as a pea is propelled out of a pea-shooter. It was a phenomenon by no means unusual in a well as unstable in its balance of forces as this one. In fact, under like conditions none but a madman would have dared to risk Maddox's maneuver.

The latter had not put fifty feet behind him when up out of the well mouth shot the gleaming tin cylinder. Directly above and in its path hung the massive forty-foot steel bit suspended from its wire cable.

What happened next the observers were never able to agree upon, but the world dissolved into an inferno of smoke and flame and the suddenness of it rocked the sky, upheaved the earth. The two

came together with a cataclysmic roar. Furlong and Betty Durham were tossed headlong, flung down like straws. When they scrambled to their feet, dazed, shaken, terrified, it was to find themselves enveloped in a mighty dust cloud. The eighty-foot tower of heavy timbers was gone; in an instant it had utterly vanished. Where it had stood was a shallow, smoking crater. Splinters of planking, débris of every sort, were scattered far and wide; particles of earth and gravel were raining from the heavens with the sound of a heavy hailstorm; nothing in the neighborhood of the well remained except the boiler and engine, and the former lay upon its side. Even the bushes had been whipped out, uprooted, shaved off as by a sweeping scythe.

That afternoon Furlong's friend, the engineer, came over to the farmhouse with a considerable bundle in his arms.

"How's Betty?" he inquired.

"She's all right, but pretty well bruised, of course."

"Well, I guess there's nothin' more us boys can do, so we're goin' in to town."

"Right. I'll stay here until Mrs. Durham gets back."

"Here's all of Tiller's stuff that we could find. I reckon you better look after it."

"Anything besides clothes?"

"Not much. A few letters an' things we found in his bunk. Miz' Durham can keep 'em in case he's got relatives. There's one suit of clothes that would fit me. No use to throw 'em away. Say! It's funny how scared he was of powder. It musta been a hunch."

Shortly after the engineer had left, Ben came to Betty with a queer light in his eyes. In his hand he held a soiled sheet of foolscap paper.

"Feel strong enough to stand another explosion?" he inquired with an effort to suppress his agitation. "Well, the queerest thing—! This farm doesn't belong to your aunt Mary, after all; it belongs to *you!*" The girl gasped; she voiced some breathless query, but Ben ran on: "Your uncle Joe left it to you, just as he promised. He left everything to you, except a thousand dollars to her. This is his will and Maddox had it. I guess it's a good will, even though your uncle wrote it himself. Anyhow it's witnessed by two people —Maddox and another. From the date I figure it must have been signed just a day or so before he was killed."

"Where did it come from? How did Maddox—?"

"I've figured that out, too. Mr. Durham must have had it in his pocket when Maddox found him. That would explain everything—how he made your aunt do just what he wanted and why she didn't dare to fire him."

"That's why she said I'd *have* to marry him! *That's* why— Oh, Ben!" Betty rose suddenly and clutched Furlong. "I knew she was a mean, selfish old thing, but I never thought she was so—wicked. This oil is a curse to poor people. I *hate* it!"

"Why, Betty!" Furlong exclaimed. "You're the wicked one to quarrel—"

"She's the only kin I've got left and I tried my best to love her. But she was so greedy for quick money that nothing mattered. Maddox, too! It made beasts of them. I almost wish we'd never heard of oil." After a moment the speaker continued, more quietly: "I lied to you last night. It was Tiller who came here."

Furlong's body stiffened, he breathed an oath, then he muttered: "I thought so. Why didn't you tell me?"

"What's more, she knew he was—coming! They arranged it. She as good as sent him! That's how he got the kitchen key."

This announcement the man greeted with the growl of an animal. He began to pace about the

room; his face had grown black and threatening; his fingers were working as he stormed:

"Wait! Wait till she gets back here!"

"You can't lay your hands on a woman—"

"*Can't I?*" he breathed.

Betty shook her head; a moment, then a new expression slowly crept into her eyes; her chin set itself firmly. "*No!*" she declared. "But you can lay 'em on her trunk and drag it out here where I can pack it."

"I sure can," Ben agreed. "And what's more, when you get it packed I can lug it out to the gate where it will be nice and handy for her." As he finished speaking his frown disappeared; it was replaced by a grin and he said: "Say, Betty! What d'you think? I'm going to marry an heiress, after all."

THE END